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**Women, Ableism and Schooling: Exploring the Experiences of Women with Physical  
Disabilities and Women with Learning Challenges in a Postsecondary School**

**Context**

By

**Kara Delicata**

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through the Faculty of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2016

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### **DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study used qualitative research methods to explore the academic and social experiences of 16 undergraduate women with either a learning challenge or a physical disability in postsecondary school. In semi-structured interviews, these women discussed the ways in which their experiences were often shaped by power, dominant understandings of normality, and social constructions of gender, as well as visible and invisible disabilities. The major findings showed aspects of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) missing on campus for those with disabilities, and a resistance to change by the normative population, causing a lack of awareness and understanding. It should be emphasized that these are the perceptions and experiences of these participants and should not be generalized to others with disabilities outside of this study. Resources for those with disabilities were also lacking. Visibility of the disability itself often played a major role in the perceptions, attitudes, and responses of other people toward them. Recommendations for are also discussed with regards to future research in this area are also discussed.

**DEDICATION**

For where all love is, the speaking is unnecessary. It is all. It is undying. And it is enough.

- Gabaldon (1991, p. 511)

To Jordan, with all my love.

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There are many people that deserve recognition for their support and dedication to this doctoral journal of mine. One in particular, is Dr. Christopher Greig. Throughout both my Master and Doctoral degrees you have provided encouragement, constructive criticism, and truly taught me how to write like an academic. I would not have gotten this far without your help.

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## Caged Bird

A free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind  
and floats downstream  
till the current ends  
and dips his wing  
in the orange sun rays  
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks  
down his narrow cage  
can seldom see through  
his bars of rage  
his wings are clipped and  
his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze  
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees  
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn  
and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams  
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream  
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

- Angelou (1983/2015, p. 189)

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Within contemporary Canadian society, persons with disabilities experience social, cultural, political and economic marginalization (Devlin & Pothier, 2006; Prince, 2009; Wilton, 2006). Compared to other populations, persons with disabilities, particularly women and children with disabilities, can experience lower levels of personal security, and are more vulnerable to violence and exploitation (Perreault, 2009; Petersilia, 2001; Tutty, Giurgiu, Moorey, LeDrew, Jesso, Ondejko, & Tenzin, 2010). Faced with attitudinal and structural forms of discrimination, persons with disabilities also tend to experience disproportionate levels of unemployment and low income (Wilton, 2006). In 2011, for example, the employment rate among people with disabilities in Canada between the ages of 25 and 64 was about 49% compared to 79% for people without disabilities (Pettinicchio, 2015). And unfortunately, when Canadians with disabilities do engage in the labour force, they take home anywhere between 10% and 15% less than similar workers without disabilities (Pettinicchio, 2015). Persons with disabilities have often found themselves excluded and disadvantaged in various areas of society because organizations and institutions, policies and particular practices have often been established without taking into careful consideration the existence of persons with disabilities. This includes schools.

Many students with physical and learning disabilities face significant challenges at some levels of their schooling experiences. Some examples include students not being provided with the specialized services that are required for success (*Moore v. British Columbia (Education)*, 2012), less access to university education (Finnie, Childs, &

Wismer, 2011), proper accessibility to school buildings (Erten, 2001), or little support for their goals from caregivers and educational staff (Hogansen, Powers, Geenen, Gil-Kashiwabara, Powers, 2008). In order to address these challenges, it is important to understand the experiences of persons with disabilities as this may help to combat these issues and create a more inclusive, equitable society for persons with disabilities. One of the ways in which this can be done is by examining provincial legislation in regards to persons with disabilities in Ontario.

In 2001, in keeping with recent legislative changes, such as the Ontario Community Living Initiative in 1996 and the Ontario Disability Support Program Act in 1997 (Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2014, first edition, 2012), as well as growing social awareness of disability that views it as a social construction, the Government of Ontario, in consultation with persons with disabilities, enacted the Ontarians with Disabilities Act. The main goal of the Act was to “address the identification, removal and prevention of barriers to persons with disabilities in the organization’s by-laws, if any, and in its policies, programs, practices and services” (Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2001, c. 32, s. 15 (2)). In terms of the Act’s application to postsecondary institutions, it should help students who are differently-abled to “level the [playing] field” (Hibbs & Pothier, 2006, p. 195) in the sense that they should be able to “access and participate in post-secondary education . . . that does not result in disadvantage for the person seeking (it)” (p. 196). Over a decade later, however, some of these goals have not translated into positive postsecondary academic outcomes for many students with disabilities (Fichten, Ferraro, Asuncion, Chwojka, Barile, Nguyen, Klomp, & Wolforth, 2009; Hibbs & Pothier, 2006). While there have been some improvements, such as the ability for students with disabilities to record their class lectures at some

schools like the University of Windsor (Sheppard, 2014), there are still some major areas that require improvement. For example, in a study of Canadian colleges and university students with a variety of disabilities, Fichten et al. (2009) found that despite the benefits of online learning courses (such as the course notes for classes being more readily available), there were numerous problems with the online digital realm. These problems included course websites and management systems being inaccessible because certain adaptations that the students needed (such as screen reading software and digital videos and audio clips) would not work on the site (Fichten et al., 2009). Digital videos, for example, are critical for students with hearing impairments, and yet they are completely inaccessible for these students as they are not being captioned for them (Fichten et al., 2009).

### **Definitions**

Disability is a difficult word to define, as there are a variety of definitions for the word. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2015), "disability" is defined as "1b) a limitation in the ability to pursue an occupation because of a physical or mental impairment; 2) a lack of legal qualification of something; 3) a disqualification, restriction, or disadvantage". While this definition attempts to clearly define what is and what is not a disability, it is limited as it constructs disability largely as "lack", or an individual issue that falls outside what has been taken to be the assumed 'natural' order of life. The problem, according to Devlin and Pothier (2006), is that simplistic definitions such as this construct a "binaristic approach to disability (that) engenders a process of 'othering' " (p. 5). Even the definition of disability in the *Ontario Human Rights Code* (1990) constructs disability and people with disabilities as something other than the norm (Vazquez, 2011). In section 10 (1) of the code (1990), "disability" is defined as:

(a) any degree of physical disability, infirmity, malformation or disfigurement that is caused by bodily injury, birth defect or illness and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, includes diabetes mellitus, epilepsy, a brain injury, any degree of paralysis, amputation, lack of physical co-ordination, blindness or visual impediment, deafness or hearing impediment, muteness or speech impediment, or physical reliance on a guide dog or other animal or on a wheelchair or other remedial appliance or device, (b) a condition of mental impairment or a developmental disability, (c) a learning disability, or a dysfunction in one or more of the processes involved in understanding or using symbols or spoken language, (d) a mental disorder, or (e) an injury or disability for which benefits were claimed or received under the insurance plan established under the *Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997*; (“handicap”) (para. 20).

According to Vazquez (2011), this definition of disability conforms to an ableist view as it constructs a person with a disability as someone who cannot do the things other *normal* people can. Therefore, definitions such as those provided by Merriam-Webster (2015) and the *Ontario Human Rights Code* (1990) do very little to challenge the way persons with disabilities are often excluded from “mainstream” society. I would like to see a definition of disability that moves away from labelling those with disabilities as deficient (a term with a highly negative connotation) while still acknowledging that *differences* may exist. In my view, the word “different” is a term that still ensures persons with disabilities can have equitable opportunities as well as their academic and social needs met through things like accommodations, but it refrains from constructing the individual as something lacking.

For the purposes of this study, disability will be defined as a social construction. By this I mean, in part, that people with disabilities do face various real challenges in their everyday lives. However, it is the meanings, beliefs, and attitudes that are constructed and attached and applied to 'disability' and are an outcome of normalizing processes and situated in relations of power but tend to marginalize and disadvantage people differently abled. Or, as Gilbert and Majury (2006) suggest, "in the absence of

stigma, barriers, negative social response, or a history of disadvantage, [disability] would not be considered a disability" (pp. 296-297). Rather, instead of an attempt to show something wrong with the individual (e.g., disability as a deficiency or abnormality) as the Merriam-Webster (2015) definition suggests, the approach to exploring and understanding disability that the proposed study will adopt will take into careful consideration complex processes whereby some people become constituted as "disabled" while others are labeled "abled" in the context of an "ableist" society. By doing so, the social model adopted for this study views disability as "difference" which "might lead us to thinking about fixing the social attitudes" (Gilbert & Majury, 2006, p. 297) rather than "fixing" the individual with the disability (see also, Hibbs & Pothier, 2006; Linton, 1998; Oliver, 2004).

More specifically, in the context of this study, *physical disability* will be defined as any person who uses a wheelchair for mobility, but also may include, but is not limited to, other differences such as a cerebral palsy, hearing or visual impairment. In addition, *learning challenge* will be defined as any difference that "invariably interfere with the acquisition and use of one or more of the following important skills: oral language (e.g., listening, speaking, understanding), reading (e.g. decoding, comprehension), (or) written language (e.g. spelling, written expression) . . ." (Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario, 2001, p. 1). For clarification, the participants in this study have learning difficulties that may primarily be described as learning disabilities, but it is important to note that learning difficulties and learning disabilities are not always the same thing.

Important also to the conceptualization of the world adopted for this study is the idea of *ableism*. Simply put, and as defined by Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012), *ableism* will refer to the preference of people/society for abilities that perpetuate an assumed



"normality". Critical scholars have argued that the structures of contemporary society, including schooling, systemically tend to reinforce the status quo by privileging the cultural, social, and political experiences of so called able-bodied people over others. Or, in other words, "ableism as a concept describes, and is reflected in, individual and group perceptions of certain abilities as essential" (2012, p. 40). As ableism is a major crux of my study, this will be discussed in more depth in a separate section below. *Social world* in this study will be defined as "the way in which [a person's] own life is embedded in, is shaped by, and influenced [their] family, community, society, and world" (Ballantine & Roberts, 2010, p. 3). Lastly, *patriarchal society* is another concept that has critical implications to this study. According to Johnson (2005), "a society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege\* by being *male dominated, male identified, and male centered*" (p. 5, \* in the original quote). In other words, where a power differential occurs between the men and women in that society, making the foundation the oppression of women (Johnson, 2005).

### **Elementary/Secondary and Postsecondary Contexts**

The ongoing and historical underrepresentation in postsecondary institutions for students with disabilities is surprising given that elementary and secondary schools across Ontario are all bound by section 8 (3) of the Education Act (1990) which states that:

The Minister shall ensure that all exceptional children in Ontario have available to them, in accordance with this Act and the regulations, appropriate special education programs and special education services without payment of fees by parents or guardians resident in Ontario . . .

Yet, according to the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2003), within both elementary and secondary schools there are significant barriers in funding, accessibility for students with physical disabilities, as well as issues with the entire accommodations process.

These barriers include issues specific to the creation and maintenance of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) that prevent these "appropriate special education programs" (Education Act, 1990) from fulfilling the rights of this population (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2003). According to the Ontario Ministry of Education (2000), an IEP:

is a written plan describing the special education program and/or services required by a particular student. It identifies learning expectations that are modified from or alternative to the expectations given in the curriculum policy document for the appropriate grade and subject or course, and/or any accommodations and special education services needed to assist the student in achieving his or her learning expectations (para.5).

In fact, according to Dworet and Bennett (2002), there are barriers to the IEP process specifically. Not only does it "vary from province to province" (2002, p. 23), but higher levels of funding depend on a "confirmation of exceptionality by a medical practitioner or psychologist" (p. 25). This is a problem perhaps because opinions may differ from one province or medical doctor to the next in terms of what constitutes 'disability' and because of this, students who may have legitimate disabilities that require more resources might not get the funding that they need. The IEP process in the province of Ontario for example, may be somewhat problematic. Since the process for receiving special educational services is set by each individual school board within the province, some boards may be more stringent than others as far as giving a student an Individual Education Plan (Demeris, Childs, & Jordan, 2007). In addition, for many families, participation in the IEP process is often viewed as negative in nature (Fish, 2006) especially if the parent(s) are from a diverse cultural background (Lo, 2008; Salas, 2004), drawing our attention to the intersection of race, ethnicity, and disability.

Barriers that prevent differently abled students from succeeding in academic contexts are not just limited to students in Ontario. Canadians must abide by section 15 (1) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) which states that:

Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

However, while there is a general belief across provincial policies that inclusion is the first choice for students with disabilities and there have been some improvements "toward the goal of inclusive education" (Katz, 2012, p. 159), because of various policy differences *between* the provinces (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007), there are still a large number of children with disabilities in Canada who are being educated separately from the non-disabled student population (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007; Katz, 2012; Porter, 2004). However, I do recognize that single answers do not work for complex needs, and that sometimes the best environment for students with disabilities is not the general education classroom.

The issues and barriers mentioned above may also be influencing enrolment and attainment for students with disabilities in postsecondary education. According to data collected in 2006, which included data for persons with learning disabilities as well as those who had disabilities affecting their mobility, out of the approximately 17 million Canadian adults between the ages 25-64, only about 8% of those with disabilities have received a postsecondary bachelor's degree, compared to roughly 15% of non-disabled Canadian adults in the same age category (Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, 2011; see also, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2009). People with disabilities are facing various challenges that work against

their ability to secure a postsecondary education. Unfortunately, one of these challenges is the Canadian legal system itself.

### **Disabilities and the Canadian Legal System**

Legal systems have been implicated in creating and normalizing "ideals" when it comes to ability/disability and people. According to Frazee, Gilmour, and Mykitiuk (2006), "law mobilizes ideals and assumptions about the nature of bodies in its determinations of what is or is not a health issue, and in its definitions- both explicit and implicit- of health, health care, and rights of access" (p. 224). To put it differently, the legal system often powerfully shapes what comes to be understood as "normal" in institutions such as schools. Of course, and by extension, it also powerfully shapes and sometimes determines what society considers abnormal. This, in part, is accomplished by the way the legal system illustrates the fact that "bodies that depart from the norm — bodies marked by some condition of impairment — disrupt the rules" (Frazee et al., 2006, p. 224). The legal system then, remains an institution that, while perhaps in some instances may secure social and political benefits for people with disabilities, has also been used to unwittingly, and at times with good intentions, discriminate against people with disabilities (Devlin & Pothier, 2006; MacPherson, 2006; Sampson, 2006; Tyjewski, 2006).

One example of this discrimination can be seen in a notable Supreme Court of Canada case, *Eaton v. Brant County Board of Education* (1997), which probed issues of ability and disability in the context of education. In this case, Carol and Clayton Eaton filed an appeal on behalf of their daughter Emily Eaton, to the Brant County Board of Education (now known as the Grand Erie District School Board in Brantford, Ontario) (1997). This appeal was due to the school board's decision to place their twelve-year-old

daughter Emily, in a special education class (1997). It was recommended by the local school board that Emily, who has cerebral palsy, should no longer be a part of a regular school classroom because it "was not in the child's best interests and indeed that it might well harm her" (Eaton v. Brant County Board of Education, 1997, p. 242). The child's parents wanted Emily to be a part of the regular school classroom despite significant obstacles in Emily's life and learning (1997). The Divisional Court, however, determined that the case was not contravening section 15 (1) of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms because there had been a "three-year trial period in a regular class" (1997, p. 269) which resulted in what the school board deemed as little progress in Emily's overall health, well-being, and learning. Therefore, the decision of placement in a special education class "did not constitute the imposition of a burden or disadvantage nor did it constitute the withholding of a benefit or advantage from the child. Neither the Tribunal's order nor its reasoning can be construed as a violation of s. 15" (1997, p. 279). After both an Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) ruling and the Divisional Court of Appeals Ruling, the Supreme Court of Canada eventually decided that Emily being placed in a segregated classroom for students with special needs followed what was in the "best interests" of the child (Dworet & Bennett, 2002, p. 25; Eaton v. Brant County Board of Education, 1997). Certainly, this case highlights the complexity of these situations and brings pointed questions to the forefront about the nature of inclusion and exclusion. Following the court decision, however, Emily's family placed Emily in a regular classroom setting within a different school board where her integration into the regular classroom was successful (Arch Disability Law, 1997). This conclusion ultimately calls into question the notion of what constitutes "best interests" (p. 25) of a child, and suggests that if all parties involved genuinely want inclusion to work, it will (1997).

In another notable recent Canadian court case, *Moore v. British Columbia (Education)* (2012), issues of discrimination based on disability were also front and centre. In *Moore v. British Columbia*, the case focused on a family with a child with disabilities, Jeffrey, and their local school board. Frederick Moore, on behalf of son Jeffrey who had severe dyslexia, argued that his son was discriminated against by School District No. 44 in North Vancouver and the British Columbia Ministry of Education when they told Mr. Moore and his wife (Jeffrey's parents) that Jeffrey needed specialized services that could not be provided in a regular school. Following this, a school district appointed psychologist and a learning assistance teacher recommended that Jeffrey attend a separate school to receive the extra educational services that were required for his learning since the Diagnostic Centre in his current district was closing due to a lack of funding. In light of the facility's closing, Jeffrey spent several years not receiving the educational services he required, potentially putting him even further behind in his learning. Perhaps highlighting broader issues surrounding the power and privilege afforded to some people by 'ableism,' a force which shapes the larger social and political context, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that there was in fact discrimination by the school board because "human rights law requires service providers to make their services accessible to persons with disabilities" (Council of Canadians with Disabilities, 2013, para. 13), which was not done. However, this case was in the court system for approximately 15 years before the Moore family received this ruling on their son's behalf (Council of Canadians with Disabilities, 2013). In addition to the disadvantages faced by disabled persons within the Canadian legal system, there are also a number of issues related to women and disabilities within the academic context.

### **Women/Disability Issues**

Evidence suggests that students with disabilities often are "pushed out" of post secondary contexts due to "ableism". For example, in 2006, approximately 16% of the male and female population with disabilities between the ages of 15-24 dropped out of their Canadian postsecondary program, citing their disability as the issue (Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, 2011, p. 28). However, females with physical disabilities or learning challenges may possibly be at a significant disadvantage when it comes to school achievement because they face a "double discrimination" as they are both female and have a disability (Blanck, Adya, & Reina, 2007; Emanuel, 2000; Habib, 1995; Schur, 2004; Sheldon, 2014; Traustadottir, 1990; Wehmeyer & Rousso, 2001; Wehmeyer & Rousso, 2006). For example, according to the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2003), the Learning Opportunities Task Force (LOTF) "has identified problems with gender-based discrimination among students with learning disabilities whereby girls and women suffer from diminished educational opportunities (in higher education)" (para.58). Unfortunately, this problem is not simply limited to the province of Ontario. In fact, all over the world "on every measure of educational, vocational, financial and social success, women and girls with disabilities fare less well than the nondisabled female or disabled male counterparts" (Wehmeyer & Rousso, 2006, p. 393).

Aside from the disadvantages present in school achievement for females with disabilities, there are additional social issues for this population as well. Females with disabilities tend to have lower self-awareness, lower self-esteem, and feel more socially isolated than non-disabled women (Nosek, Hughes, Swedlund, Taylor, & Swank, 2003). Thus, if the key aim of the Ontarians with Disabilities Act (2001) is to remove barriers to

an effective education for students with disabilities, then administrators, among others, need to consider carefully and take seriously the experiences of women with disabilities. One approach to better understand how these women's experiences shape and sometimes determine academic achievement among students is to investigate females with learning challenges and females with physical disabilities in order to understand their experiences both socially and academically in postsecondary education. It is particularly useful to start with these groups as there has been little attention paid to the intersection of gender and disability as well as how experiences of visible versus invisible disabilities may affect postsecondary outcomes and experiences in research thus far for women.

Exploring the experiences of females with physical disabilities and learning challenges may help contribute to a better understanding of how the double discrimination may have contributed to low numbers of females with disabilities in post secondary education. In addition, exploring and understanding the experiences of females with physical disabilities and learning challenges may lead to important research and policy recommendations for how to improve postsecondary schools in terms of curricular and accessibility changes, as well as an overall awareness of our own attitudes and beliefs about people with disabilities.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Most of the research currently available discusses the issues and challenges for students with disabilities as an undifferentiated group rather than separating the findings by other factors such as gender. Despite this limitation in the research literature, there do exist a few studies that are notable. This review of the literature, then, will be divided into three sections: women in postsecondary education, people with disabilities in postsecondary education, and women with disabilities in postsecondary education.

#### **Women in Postsecondary Education**

In Canada, almost a full one hundred years after the establishment of King's College, women began to enter into postsecondary institutions (Harris, 1976). This newfound admittance of women did not come easily, however, as "there was a good deal of concern about the consequences of admitting women to the same classes as men" (Harris, 1976, p. 116). Nevertheless, by 1940, almost 16% of the total enrolment in postsecondary institutions in Canada were women which was reflected in the progress of the classes offered: "education, household science, nursing, social work, library science, physical and occupational therapy . . ." (Harris, 1976, p. 351). By the year 1987, enrolment for women in undergraduate programs in Canada surpassed that of men and by the early 2000s 58% of the total undergraduate enrolment were women (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2011). While this is positive news for young women who wish to pursue a postsecondary education, women continue to encounter a number of issues while on campus.

One of the issues that women may face on campus is sexism. Women in postsecondary institutions "continue to confront a resilient sexist culture on campus, and a

persistent if informal segregation that relegates them to less profitable and prestigious colleges, courses, and careers" (Sadker, Sadker, & Zittleman 1994/2009, p. 216). In short, according to Sadker et al., (1994/2009), women become the "female majority on a male campus" (p. 241). This is particularly problematic because while women are being let in the door of universities more frequently by those in positions of power, they are still not being given any real power themselves. Instead, men continue to dominate power positions on campus while women are being relegated to the sidelines. Most recently as 2013 for example, women who were full-time employed full-time as university professors in postsecondary institutions across Canada were still making approximately 12% less money than men in the same position and constituted slightly less than 40% of university professors with full-time work (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2015). This demonstration of who has the real power is often played out in various arenas around the campus itself, such as sexism and gender segregation in certain academic fields of study.

Cases of sexism in particular, often occur against women who are in the STEM related fields. Research conducted by De Welde and Laursen (2011) found that many women in these fields felt the fields themselves were "old boys clubs" (p. 577) and women were often perceived as stupid or as having "slept their way" into the program (p. 578). In addition, postsecondary institutions are often sites of sexual harassment against women, whereby harassment is often laughed off by the victim, thought of as a joke, and goes unreported (Reyes, 2012). These perceptions and beliefs may be because of the prevailing understanding that some of these women have regarding power differentials in university. Many women may believe that if they want to be successful, they also need to be quiet. This particularly may be the case for women who enter certain fields within postsecondary education.

It is critical to note that in postsecondary institutions, gender segregation in fields of study continues to be a considerable problem (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2008; Jacobs, 1996; Robbins & Simpson, 2009; Sadker et al., 1994/2009). For example, during the 2011/2012 school year in Canada, women constituted only 24% of the students with a math field of study and 18% of the students in an engineering, architecture or related field of study (Government of Canada, 2013). This may be due to the fact that "a substantial body of evidence establishes that most people— both women and men— hold implicit biases" (National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, & Institute of Medicine, 2006, p. 3), which may perpetuate already established stereotypes. For example, the stereotype of women as caregivers is still prevalent throughout society, even among Canadian youth, and is perhaps one cause of the gender imbalance in certain fields of study (Abma, 2012). Thus, women continue to be overrepresented in the education field, while still considered the minority in historically male-dominated fields such as engineering, math and the computer sciences (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2008).

There is considerable evidence to suggest that female mentors or instructors may help inspire young women to succeed in postsecondary education (Krupnick, 1985; Robbins & Simpson, 2009; Sadker et al., 1994/2009), particularly in male-dominated fields (Robbins & Simpson, 2009). However, the chances of having these female mentors may be slim, as recent research has shown that there is still a gender disparity on university campuses when it comes to full professorships for women compared to men, and in terms of the academic disciplines in which these women are present (Council of Canadian Academies, 2012). To that point, the research has shown that "the percentage of women across disciplines, mirrors the gendered university" (Drakich & Stewart, 2007, p.

7). Therefore, in order to effect positive change, women faculty members must fight against the same constraints that their female students also face.

### **Students with Disabilities in Postsecondary Education**

To date, students with disabilities continue to be underrepresented in postsecondary institutions across Canada (Chambers, Sukai, & Bolton, 2011; The Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science, & Technology, 2011). According to a 2003 national study on Canadian postsecondary students with disabilities, "eight percent of institutions had no students registered to receive disability related services. In most [postsecondary institutions], however, the percentage of students with disabilities was under 1%" (Fichten, Asuncion, Barile, Robillard, Fossey, & Lamb, 2003, p. 99). Interestingly, out of this small population, "the average percentage of postsecondary students with disabilities registered to receive disability related services varies from 1/2% to 6% in Canada's provinces and territories (2003, p. 101). Furthermore, according to a survey conducted in Ontario of various underrepresented groups in postsecondary education, Finnie et al. (2011) found that while survey respondents with a disability in Ontario had a relatively high access rate to community college (approximately 46%), the access rate for university remained low. In fact, only 22.1% of youth with a disability have access to university education in comparison to approximately 49% of youth without disabilities (Finnie et al., 2011). Also, in the same study, Ontario students "whose parents identified them as having a cognitive or physical disability have an overall PSE participation rate 15 percentage points lower than the participation rate of those without a disability" (Finnie et al., 2011, p. 21). However, there may be critically important reasons for why this is the case.

The scarcity of students with disabilities attending university may be due, in part, to the structure of the secondary school curriculum for those with disabilities. For example, Stodden, Galloway and Stodden (2003) suggest the removal of "high-stakes testing" (p. 19) in favour of other appraisals for success, as well as the connection of "secondary school IEP goals . . . to individualized transition goals and the needs of youth with disabilities to ensure success in postschool environments" (p. 20). While Ontario Ministry of Education documents like *Growing Success* (2010) were enacted to ensure that schools make a concerted effort to assess students based on multiple methods, there is still a large emphasis on EQAO (Education Quality and Accountability Office) testing within the province. Students attending secondary school for example, must pass the literacy test in order to fulfill their graduation requirements (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013a). Using different types of assessments can be very positive for students with disabilities (Erten, 2011; Izzo, Murray, & Novak, 2008). This is because these "assessment methods" are often focused on addressing all learning preferences instead of having the student assessed on only one skill: whether or not they can memorize from course texts and notes (Erten, 2011, p. 109). Asking students to memorize these materials and then having them recall this information on an exam may be especially difficult for students with learning challenges. However, the structure of the curriculum may not be the only barrier. Societal expectations may be playing a larger role as well.

Societal expectations may be especially troublesome for women. It has been shown that even if women with disabilities show initiative in pursuing their goals for adulthood such as attending postsecondary institutions, having a family, and career goals, those who are in positions to support them, such as parents, educators and support staff, often feel these goals are unrealistic for them (Hogansen et al., 2008). This may be

because societal constructions of gender and disability influence beliefs about women with disabilities. For instance, Powers, Hogansen, Geenen, Powers, and Kashiwabara (2008) discovered that parents were much more hesitant in permitting their daughters with disabilities to "engage in activities" (p. 360) or have "access to reliable transportation" (p. 361) than they would be if they had boys with disabilities. This was particularly the case when the young women were "culturally and linguistically diverse" (p. 351). These restrictions may affect the population of students with disabilities choosing to enter postsecondary school. Therefore, despite the assertion that students with disabilities are enrolling more frequently in postsecondary education today than any other time in our history (Higbee, Katz, & Schultz, 2010), students with disabilities are still falling far below students without disabilities in terms of university enrolment and success (Kirby, 2009).

Much of this falling behind of students with disabilities may be due to issues of ableist hegemony in schools. A study by Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012) examined postsecondary policy regarding disability through the words of postsecondary students with a mixture of both invisible and visible disabilities (such as paraplegia, cerebral palsy, and Bipolar/ADHD for example) using semi-structured interviews at the University of Calgary. These interviews were then examined using an ableism lens. Not surprisingly, the researchers discovered that ableist hegemony played a huge role in the lives of the participants as they often "internalize[d] ableism" (p. 43). For instance, they noted feeling "different" from others or that there was "something wrong" with them (p. 43). One participant for example, shared that this was a possible reason for why they felt rejected by people socially. In short, the persons with disabilities viewed themselves as the problem and understood that they did not "fit" in society. Further, the participants also

"used ableism" (p.44) to show self-worth and value. For example, one participant "demonstrate[d] [their] value" to society by showing people something he deemed as valuable, like his academic ability. In his mind, sharing these types of values with others also got more people to pay attention to him and dispel ideas about him and his disability (p. 44). This was sometimes done by showing intelligence and confidence in themselves, and being charming toward others (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012).

The participants also recommended a variety of policy changes for postsecondary institutions. Some of these changes included making the accommodations easier for students with disabilities, changing the biomedical model of disability that is present in some postsecondary policy today (Hibbs & Pothier, 2006), and "embracing diversity at the levels of policy, curriculum, and interpersonal interaction" (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012, p. 45). Higbee et al., (2010) also found disability-related issues within courses that are rooted in diversity and inclusion such as the fact that "they do not address disability" (p. 12). Further, "efforts to embed multiculturalism within mainstream courses and texts tend to focus on race, ethnicity, and gender, and generally exclude disability" (p. 12). Moreover, educators are using uninformed language to describe those with disabilities, and, the disclosure process to receive disability services can be stigmatizing for students with disabilities as these processes "can. . . segregate students and result in a de facto breach of their confidentiality" (pp. 9-10). This is unfortunate, as it seems that the increased attention put on campus diversity does not apply to those with disabilities (Beilke & Yssel, 1999; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Further, those students that have been identified as having a learning disability or a physical disability may be at the greatest disadvantage on university campuses across the country because, in comparison to their peers who are nondisabled, students with

disabilities still face physical barriers as well as financial and attitudinal ones, and lower rates of access to postsecondary education in comparison to their peers without disabilities (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2009; Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, 2011), and also experience some segregation (see, for example, Higbee et al., 2010).

### *Invisible Disabilities*

Those with disabilities that are "invisible" may have a particularly difficult time in academia. An invisible disability is defined as "physical or mental impairments that are not readily apparent to others" (Vavouraki, Panagiaris, & Sflomos, 2009, p. 1). A "hidden disability" such as a learning disability like dyslexia, presents a variety of challenges for students attending postsecondary institutions. According to a study by Denhart (2008), these challenges include being labeled as "lazy" (p. 493), feeling "misunderstood" by faculty (p. 491), and having difficulties keeping organized. Being constructed as both a problem and different by professors, and the belief held by professors that students were faking their disability were also listed as particular challenges for this group of students (Beilke & Yssel, 1999). In particular, Denhart's study found that "the most striking finding. . . was the overwhelming reluctance of these informants [participants with LD] to request or use accommodations" (2008, p. 493). This may be because the participants in the study feared that asking for the accommodations they required would result in being labeled as "inferior" (p. 492). In addition, these various challenges in postsecondary education, may lead students with invisible disabilities to underplay the status of their own disability (Barnard-Brak, Lechtenberger, & Lan, 2010), and use their own cognitive strategies to overcome barriers they face (Denhart, 2008). Similar to those students with



invisible disabilities, students with physical disabilities also face significant challenges in the postsecondary context. It is this population that I discuss next.

### *Physical Disabilities*

Although there is not an abundance of research related to students with physical disabilities in postsecondary institutions, some evidence suggests that they too, face numerous challenges in postsecondary education. Akin to those with invisible disabilities, "students with visibly apparent disabilities like visual and mobility impairments also continue to be treated as 'deficient' rather than merely 'different' " (Higbee et al., 2010, p. 8). Students with physical disabilities entering a postsecondary school, face the normal anxieties that other students have, but they also have added anxieties due to the nature of their disability that other students do not (Goode, 2007). For example, Goode (2007) found that those students with physical disabilities can be apparent to those around them, as they often have to sit in the front row of their classrooms, which can draw attention toward them in a negative way.

The accessibility of campus buildings may be particularly troublesome for students with physical disabilities. A study conducted by Holloway (2001) looked at the postsecondary school experience from the perspective of those with disabilities themselves using semi-structured interviews. It was found that for those students with mobility impairments, access to campus buildings was both a challenging and frustrating experience for them. This was particularly so in the library of the school, where not only did the students feel added stress to access the library, but having to explain themselves to university staff each time they tried to do so. However, while these barriers to higher learning do exist for students with disabilities, it is important to understand and examine the factors that can help manage these barriers and increase postsecondary success.

*Universal Design For Learning (UDL)*

One of the central factors identified for postsecondary school success for students with disabilities is the institution's adoption of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Higbee et al., 2010). UDL began in 1984 when education researchers created the Center for Applied Special Technology (also commonly known as CAST) ("Cast Timeline," n.d.) and it is now considered to be one of the most commonly used methods to differentiate instruction to students with a variety of disabilities (O'Connell, Freed, Rothberg, Carl and Ruth Shapiro Family National Center for Accessible Media, WGBH Educational Foundation, 2010). UDL itself has been described as meeting the needs of all students in the classroom by adapting and designing a lesson "to multiple forms of learning and engagement to facilitate the learning of all students" (Lancaster, 2008, p. 1) For example, professors can give students varying opportunities to be successful in their classroom by having alternative ways of representing the course material, giving the students a choice for class assessments, as well as varying ways of engaging the student in the classroom (such as an online forum as well as in person lectures) (Kumar & Wideman, 2014). The concept of UDL for students with disabilities in postsecondary education has been adopted by the Ontario Ministry of Education in their elementary and secondary schools (2013b), as well as by some postsecondary institutions across Canada (Kumar & Wideman, 2014).

Other factors that have been identified for a successful postsecondary outcome and experience for students with disabilities include having a strong support system, positive experiences and interactions with both professors and peers, a good social life while in school, the ability to adjust their disability to university life, and the resources available through their respective disability office on campus (Paul, 1999). Many students

also mentioned the fact that low expectations of people with disabilities was the primary motivating factor for wanting to attend higher education in the first place (Paul, 1999). Having a strong support system with family, friends, and other forms of academic support helped students with disabilities in this study when "facing the daily demands of university life" (p. 99). Further, students who felt that their professors "had positive attitudes towards them increased their satisfaction with the university and strengthened their student life experience" (p. 101). In short, students who felt that they could be independent students, doing all of the same things that other "normal" students do, but who also knew they had the support there when they needed it, had a much more positive experience and outcome overall (Paul, 1999). Holloway (2001) noted the importance of the university adopting a student-centered approach for those with learning disabilities, as this approach eliminates placing the responsibility on the individual to fit into the institution and instead focuses on "the limitations of the systems available for accessing course information" (p. 608), which in turn, can eliminate negative feelings and frustrations for these students and result in greater postsecondary success.

### **Women with Disabilities in Postsecondary Education**

In postsecondary education, women with disabilities are encountering major issues including ableism, prejudice, exclusion and silencing (Langdon, 2012). This may be because the 'double handicap' may influence women with disabilities to restrict themselves in attaining a career or postsecondary degree (Erten, 2011; Lindstrom, Benz, & Doren, 2004). However, despite it being over 25 years since the first mention of the double handicap, its implication for the education of women with disabilities is still being largely ignored (Wehemeyer & Schwartz, 2001). For example, according to Wehmeyer and Schwartz (2001), girls who are referred to special education services who have the

same educational needs as boys being referred to the same services "are not provided access to supports and services that might address those needs" (p. 278) because, according to the referral data in their study, acting out seemed to be the basis for more frequent referral. Therefore, in order to receive the services they require, girls "will have to experience more significant problems to gain the support they need" (p. 278).

Researchers have shown that women with disabilities have lower self-awareness, lower self-esteem, and feel more socially isolated than nondisabled women (Nosek et al., 2003). Further, women with disabilities are struggling with fewer job prospects and lower income levels than non-disabled men, men with disabilities, and other women who are non-disabled, all of which contribute to women with disabilities having the highest rate of poverty out of these groups (Schur, 2004).

Research on women with disabilities in postsecondary education, particularly women with physical disabilities, is lacking (Taub, McLorg, Fanflik, 2004). This is problematic, as according to a study by Zitzelsberger (2005), having visible disabilities, particularly for women, are often compounded with feelings of rejection and being overlooked while their "identities and capacities—as citizens, as workers, as lovers, as mothers—often were denied, invalidated and unnoticed by others" (p. 399). In addition, the majority of studies on students with disabilities tend to be free of gender-related discussion (see, for example, Barnard-Brak et al., 2010; Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Paul, 1999). Of the studies that have researched gender and disabilities or gender-related outcomes, the majority have focused on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Dwyer, 2000; Hinckley & Alden, 2005). While there is some research regarding women with learning disabilities and learning challenges in

postsecondary education, research surrounding women with physical disabilities in postsecondary education is scant.

Despite little research in the area of gender and disabilities in postsecondary education, a few have been undertaken in this area. For example, a phenomenological study by Denhart (2008) was done in order to better understand the experience of being a woman with a learning disability in postsecondary education. The findings included the fact that most of the women did not want to ask for—or even use—their accommodations, they had a workload that they felt was overwhelming for them (a fact which the women felt was not being acknowledged), and in the women’s opinion, they had final products that did not match up with the effort they felt they were putting in (2008). In addition, their professors thought they were just being lazy until they disclosed their disability, which then gave rise to these professors thinking the women were “disabled rather than different” (p. 494). and Further, Lindstrom et al., (2004) used case study methodology to study what influences career choices for women with learning disabilities following their graduation from secondary school. The authors used this particular methodology for more in-depth knowledge of the certain attributes (family, school, work experiences) that may have influenced the choices of these women. It was found that while having good external and familial support as well as exposure to constructive work experiences early in their lives “helped build a foundation” (p. 61) for future careers for these women, “expectations based on gender roles. . . restricted career choices” (p. 54) and “awareness of disability limitations restricted career choice” (p. 54). Petersen (2009) used Foucault's notion of discourse to study four African American women with disabilities and their educational experiences. Three of the four women were currently in postsecondary education, and one of the women had already graduated from

"a segregated residential school" (p. 431). Petersen used an interpretivist approach which "is the understanding that all human interaction is a story, filled with multiple and often conflicting perspectives" (p.431), as the primary methodology for collecting data in this study. Petersen found that all the women had an awareness that both their gender and racial background "resulted in limited [educational] opportunities" (p. 433). The women also shunned stereotypical ideas and lack of support from educators and fought harder against them. In addition, all of the women were extremely aware of how being oppressed in multiple ways affected them and "resulted in limited opportunities" (p. 433). However, research on women with disabilities in postsecondary education remains sparse. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, it is critical to contextualize the intersection of gender and disability among young women in postsecondary education. This is particularly important because women with these disabilities may face greater obstacles than any other of the above groups.

Women with learning challenges truly face the pressures of living with a invisible disability because, "the validity of the disability can be questioned and . . . others may not understand the full extent of their limitations" (Mullins & Preyde, 2013, p. 147). This is unfortunate, as it may put women with learning disabilities at a high risk for various mental health issues. According to Wilson, Armstrong, Furrie, and Walcot (2009), women with learning disabilities reported issues with distress, depression, anxiety disorders, suicidal thoughts, professional consultation, and their overall mental health more frequently than men with learning disabilities and persons who were nondisabled. This has critical implications for students as well, as it has been found that as early as elementary school female students with learning disabilities have higher prevalence rates of depression and depressive symptoms, negative self-esteem, and interpersonal issues

compared to girls without learning disabilities and their peers without learning disabilities in general (Heath & Ross, 2000). In addition, females with learning disabilities and challenges in postsecondary school may face many challenges when it comes to their experiences on campus.

In a Canadian study on women with disabilities in postsecondary school, Erten (2011) used focus group interviews to learn about women's postsecondary school experiences and provided suggestions for how postsecondary institutions can address the needs of students with disabilities. Five out of the seven women in this study were women with learning disabilities, one had both a learning disability and mobility difficulties, one other woman also had a cognitive disability and mobility difficulties, and another had a chronic health problem. The women in this study identified barriers in coping, accessibility on campus, time management, and a lack of understanding and awareness from others, oftentimes their professors. Interestingly, these women also identified several areas of improvement that, if corrected, could make their lives easier and potentially aid in their university success. These areas included: sensitivity training workshops for staff, having a mentor, disability awareness seminars, and the use of various instructional strategies in the classroom (Erten, 2011).

In another Canadian study on women with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in postsecondary education, Dwyer (2000) noted that while the women in the study tended to blame themselves for hardships they have faced in school, they also mentioned that finding out what academic strategies worked for them via self-identification removed pressure. Further, trial and error of what they needed to do to achieve academically, and the use of classroom accommodations like being given extra time for tests helped them to succeed (Dwyer, 2000). Hinckley and Alden (2005) also

studied women with ADHD attending postsecondary education using open-ended questioning and self-reports, and discovered several factors that the women identified as contributing to their postsecondary school success. These included their capability "to internalize and regulate motivation," as well as "the ability to monitor and stabilize attitude toward self and learning" (p. 13). Also, the women in the study were more successful when they were able to be introspective and reflect on their own experiences to "adjust academic strategies" (p. 13). Women who could "take advantage of systems that aid in monitoring and organizing performance" (p. 14), such as using technology which helps them view and monitor their grades in their respective courses, was also a factor in their success. These systems were very important as "they provided quick feedback and, therefore, quick corrective responses on the part of the students" (p. 14). Lastly, women who balance[d] social and academic demands" were more successful academically in their postsecondary courses (p. 15).

On the other hand, challenges for many women with visible disabilities can lead to increases in depression, stress, and abuse, as well as low self-esteem and social connectedness compared to other women and men with a visible disability (Nosek & Hughes, 2003), which may be increased further by the "chilly climate" that students with disabilities already face in postsecondary school (Bielke & Yssel, 1999, p. 364; Taub et al., 2004). Unfortunately, this cool reception is also followed by other significant challenges for these students when they actually reach the campus itself.

In a Canadian study conducted by Scott (1993) on women with physical disabilities who had graduated from a postsecondary institution, the women identified three major priorities for them in their educational careers: having an elevator service on campus, government funding for their education, and specialized transportation services



(Scott, 1993). In addition, similar to the women with learning disabilities, the women with physical disabilities in this study identified extra time given on tests and other specialized accommodations as helpful for their success, yet also mentioned attitudinal barriers from professors as problematic. Further, these women also noted that building accessibility and access to particular courses and programs was an academic barrier for them. Another study conducted by Taub et al. (2004) used semi-structured interviews to study the notion of stigma in the college experiences of 24 women with physical disabilities. They found that the participants employed various strategies to "manage their stigma" including the use of both humor, cheer, and kindness as tools to "downplay their disability status" and attempts to lessen the discomfort felt by all parties in various social situations on a daily basis (p. 175). This reveals how deeply entrenched issues of ableism are within society. The women in this study clearly view themselves and their disability as the problem, and work to minimize this 'problem' by shifting the attention away from it (Taub et al., 2004). By making light of the situation, and by being overly kind and caring to others they can easily use "deflection" tactics to show others that the disability is not important (p. 175); rather, they can be just like everyone else. These women also used normalization to "lessen the undesirable effects of their deviant status" by attempting to prove their capability as students and as persons living with physical disabilities (p. 177). Yet, when faced with multiple issues regarding access to campus services, the women were instead "deliberately invoking a disability status" as a way to combat and advocate for themselves against the negative perceptions of them (p. 179).

### **Reflexivity: Personal Connections to the Research**

It is important and relevant to the study to discuss my own life experiences since social justice factors such as gender and disability have played an important role in

shaping my life. My sister, Jordan, was born in 1989 with severe Cerebral Palsy. According to the Ontario Federation for Cerebral Palsy (2009), Cerebral Palsy is "a lack of muscle control due to an injury to the developing brain" (para. 1). As my sister grew up, she was fitted for new leg braces, measured for a variety of wheelchairs, and faced numerous painful surgeries. She attended a children's rehabilitation centre in our city until the age of eighteen where she was placed in a classroom with other children like her to learn basic knowledge and skills such as the alphabet and work on her physiotherapy. Due to the fact that she also has intellectual disabilities, she was not eligible for a postsecondary program. She now remains at home where she is cared for on a daily basis by my parents.

Using a critical disabilities (Devlin & Pothier, 2006) and gender lens (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011; Lorber, 1994; Smith, 1987), these life experiences with my sister illustrate the segregation and general exclusion that many with disabilities face in our society. As a young secondary school student in Ontario, my sister was given few opportunities to join the *normal* school population in regular, mainstream classrooms. Much like the Emily Eaton case (Eaton v. Brant County Board of Education, 1997), since my sister was diagnosed with a severe neurological disability, intellectual disabilities, and quadriplegia, she was segregated from her *normal* peers. For the many students who are regularly placed in segregated classrooms and schools, such as those with physical and learning disabilities and challenges, this segregation may be unwarranted and inequitable.

Further, my experiences with having a differently abled sister has helped clarify in my own mind the way in which women with disabilities have been and continue to be consistently challenged, structurally and systemically, by a patriarchal society that praises able-bodied (white) women.

Finally, it is important to draw attention to my own privileged individual situation, the significance of being a white, Canadian, middle-class, able-bodied female and former collegiate athlete at the University of Michigan cannot be ignored. For instance, having a body that functioned in a way that is considered privileged within North American society, may have influenced my perspective as a researcher. For example, my own life experience shows the emphasis that society places on a body that can *perform* according to the dictates of 'ableism'. Those that have the physical ability to use their body in a way that is rewarded by our society, such as through athletic scholarships, have the power to drastically change the course of their lives, often reap significant social, political, and economic benefits. One only has to think about professional athletes and their social status to see the validity of this point. However, differently abled people who may not be able to use their bodies in this way, often have to work twice as hard to prove their worth in *any* setting including an academic setting, and more often than not, fail to reap those same social political and economic benefits (Devlin & Pothier, 2006; Hibbs & Pothier, 2006).

### **Social/Political Context of Disability**

Over the past three decades or so, there has been something of a political, social and cultural shift toward people with disabilities in North America (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). For example, politically there have been a number of laws that have enshrined rights for people with disabilities. In the United States, despite the fact that "the rights of individuals with disabilities are not constitutionally mandated" (Baker, 2006, p. 186), the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973*, the more recent *Americans with Disabilities Act* in 1990, as well as the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) were established in order to expand the civil rights of those living with disabilities (2006). In Canada as

well, despite being in effect since 1982, *The Charter of Rights and Freedoms* did not have section 15 (1) come into full effect until three years later in 1985 (Hurley, 2007). This particular section regards the equality rights of all *individuals* living in Canada and protects them from discrimination for having, for example, a physical disability (Hurley, 2007). Finally, the province of Ontario has also created policies to protect the rights of those individuals with disabilities living in the province. The *Education Amendment Act* of 1980 (also known as *Bill 82*) for example, is now widely considered to be "a landmark in special education in Ontario" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, para. 1) as it required all schools to take in and teach students with special needs. Further, listed under the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* in 2005, Ontario Regulation 429/07 provides standards that must be followed by all businesses and organizations that provide customer service to the public. For example, if a person with a disability has a guide dog that must accompany them at all times, the business must allow that animal to enter the building.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Over the past four decades, the field of Disability Studies has developed across postsecondary institutions (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). The Canadian Centre on Disability Studies (CCDS) for example, was created in 1995 to engage with universities, businesses, and the government to change attitudes toward people with disabilities in order to move toward a more inclusive society (Canadian Centre on Disability Studies, 2007). This goal has allowed CCDS to establish many working relationships with some of the most powerful and influential organizations in the country such as the Canadian Mental Health Association and the National Literacy Secretariat (2007).

The increased attention to the way differently abled people have been historically discriminated against has fueled the development of numerous courses in Disability Studies at many universities in Canada. These universities include the University of Windsor, the University of British Columbia, the University of Northern British Columbia, Vancouver Island University, Brock University, Western University, Mount Royal University, Ryerson University, the University of Winnipeg, the University of Calgary, Grant MacEwan University, the University of Manitoba, and York University, which also has a graduate program in Critical Disabilities Studies. The development of these programs shows a positive effort across Canada, and particularly, postsecondary institutions, to educate and raise awareness and strive for understanding and equality for those with disabilities living in our society.

The field of Disability Studies has also created intellectual and political space for critical disability studies to emerge. Grounded in the principles and tenets of critical theory, Critical Disabilities Studies employs "a re-evaluation of explanatory paradigms used to understand the lived experienced of disabled people and potential ways forward for social, political and economic change" (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009, p.49). One of the reasons for this move away from Disability Studies into more of a critical position is the adoption of the language of Disability Studies by government and others in positions of power, that are being used in an attempt to normalize society (2009). In other words, a normalized society is one where everyone "fits in" to a larger, homogenous group (Hibbs & Pothier, 2006, p. 203). What is considered *normal*, however, is often determined by overarching ideologies that have been reinforced and maintained for long periods of time (Foucault 1975/1995; see also, Tremain, 2005). These ideologies are deeply problematic as they powerfully shape and sometimes determine what and *who* are

considered "deviant" (Wolfensberger, 1972, p. 13). In essence, this is what Critical Disability Studies is addressing.

When it comes to understanding the idea of *disability*, the process of *normalization* is created and maintained through the concept and ideology of *ableism*. As an ideology, ableism functions to situate and organize people into a hierarchy that privileges able bodies. So, in other words, at the top of the hierarchy are able-bodied people and at the bottom of the hierarchy are those people who are differently abled. It is through the normalization process that people who sit atop the hierarchy continue to create and reinforce the *normal* or the "ideal" (for a discussion on the relationship between the processes of normalization as it relates to gender, race and sexuality, see Gleason, 1999; see also Adams, 1997). Of course it is also important to state that other social justice factors such as race, sexual identity, social class, as they intersect with issues around ableism also determine to some measure who sits atop of the hierarchy. It remains the case in Canada and other western democratic nations that white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual men remain atop the pecking order of society (Ferber, 1998; see also Greig & Hollway, 2012). Thus, the crux of what makes my area of study new and unique is the use of Critical Disabilities theory as well as gender theory to analyze the experiences of females with physical and learning disabilities within the context of postsecondary education.

### *Critical Theory*

Critical Disabilities theory is rooted in critical theory, where the main objective is the transformation, emancipation, and freedom of the oppressed in our society (Hosking, 2008; Kellner, 1990). Grounded in Marxist theory, critical theory blossomed during the 1930s with the development of the Frankfurt School (Burghardt, 2011). According to

Kellner (1990), the members of the Frankfurt School "reconstructed the Marxian categories of . . . commodification, exchange, exploitation and domination" (para. 12) and instead, studied them in an attempt "to describe the processes through which capitalist hegemony was established and the individual was dominated by his or her society" (para. 12). Thus, many of the influential members of this school such as Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse (see, for example, their writings in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1987/2002; *One Dimensional Man*, 1964) worked with a common goal of transforming society to be much more just and fair.

An important goal of critical theory is to encourage people to have a much deeper sense of responsibility to others, in a way that creates a much more socially just world. According to Burghardt (2011), central to critical theory is the notion of "moral responsibility and obligation" (p. 4). Namely, critical theorists have a sort of "communal responsibility" (Burghardt, 2011, p. 5) to understand and reflect upon history in order to make society more equitable in the future. However, it is important to be wary that this responsibility does not lead to collective feelings of guilt when speaking of those with disabilities (Burghardt, 2011). This sort of limited empathy does very little to further meaningful social change. For example, those with disabilities do not want to be viewed with charity of any kind (Devlin & Pothier, 2006), but instead wish to be recognized as fully contributing members of society. Therefore, the "collective feelings of guilt" will just lead to more instances of socially constructing individuals as "other" rather than as productive members of society.

Critical theory is also engaged in the process of rigorous analysis, in order to challenge various forms of hegemony, whether that hegemony is based on social class, race, gender or ableism. All this is done, of course, to bring about "human emancipation"

(Burghardt, 2011, p. 13). This will be done in order to attempt to understand the experiences of women with physical disabilities and learning challenges and, to encourage and engage those in positions of power, such as school administrators and policymakers, to reflect on the past in order to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for these women.

For the purposes of my own future research surrounding women with disabilities, critical theory will be a key theory guiding my work. I am keenly interested in its ability to "transform" the systems of oppression that remain in place in postsecondary education. Drawing attention to the fact that those with disabilities still encounter issues enforcing their rights in society as well as oppressive policies and practices in postsecondary education particularly, is an important step that I will take on in my work.

#### *Critical Disabilities Studies*

This study will also draw on Critical Disabilities Studies (CDS). As a newly emerging field (Hosking, 2012; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009), Critical Disabilities Studies builds on Disability Studies as it refocuses the analytical lens to take into consideration the complex relationship between power, power relations, and issues around ableism (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). CDS itself relies on several important themes: language, definitions and voice, contextual politics, philosophical challenges, and citizenship/dis-citizenship (Devlin & Pothier, 2006). According to Devlin and Pothier (2006), there are a variety of words that society uses to describe those with disabilities, and this language structures them as society's 'Other' (2006). Also, people who are in positions of power, such as government officials and policy makers that create the rules for others to follow, contextualize persons with disabilities as people who need to be pitied or viewed through a "charity" lens (2006, p. 10). Further, there are still a variety of



both structural and institutional barriers in place that keep individuals with disabilities from being fully included in most areas of society (2006).

Moreover, there is what Devlin and Pothier (2006) describe as "philosophical challenges" when it comes to exploring issues of ableism (p. 13). These philosophical challenges refer to individuals considered nondisabled in society who may not really want to change how they live their lives in order to accommodate those with disabilities (Devlin & Pothier, 2006). For example, Asch (2001) noted the installation of a new technology that was legally required to be in place on all city buses for persons with visual impairments. Prior to each stop, the system would announce, out loud, the name of the upcoming stop. The driver was required to announce the upcoming stop if the technology was not installed on a city bus. However, during the route, bus drivers would turn off the system because "they did not like having it as a routine part of their day" (Asch, 2001, p. 4). In Ontario specifically, while there are persons with disabilities working as politicians, teachers, and doctors (to name a few), career opportunities for people with disabilities are concentrated within certain areas such as service work, and within these areas, "average salaries for clients were half that received by all Ontario employees, and jobs were much more likely to be part-time" (Wilton, 2006, p. 146). This inequity toward the disabled community in Ontario may be because of the perceptions in general of the nondisabled population that they need to spend more resources in training and development. Therefore, because of these perceptions, people in positions of power keep them in menial jobs and pay them less. This is not an insignificant problem because in order to give persons with disabilities some measure of equity, it would mean to some measure that people in positions of social and political power must give some of it away. This would go a long way to creating a more socially just world for everyone.

Is a socially just world a real possibility? As we know from the history of anti-racist and anti-sexist work, people in positions of power are rarely willing to give their power away. The women's liberation movement for example, has been fighting for years to challenge dominant gender structures of our society, yet the “‘structurelessness’ [of groups] becomes a way of masking power, and within the women’s movement it is usually most strongly advocated by those who are the most powerful (whether they are conscious of their power or not)” (Freeman, 2013, p. 232). This means that those in position to make real decisions are the ones who have all the information and “those who do not know the rules and are not chosen for initiation must remain in confusion, or suffer from paranoid delusions that something is happening of which they are not quite aware” (2013, pp. 232-233). Even today, women's liberation is still struggling to achieve equity in society for women. Men still dominate the top leadership positions in the workforce while women still must consistently and continually weave through the “labyrinth” of society and accomplish tasks that men do not in order to prove their worth (Eagly & Carli, 2007). However, despite the limited amount of success in this area, it is critical to continue to work toward social change for persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups. This is particularly important as equity for persons with disabilities and the *acceptance* of this group is still a major issue within contemporary Canadian society. In fact, according to Devlin and Pothier (2006), persons with disabilities are still not considered to be true citizens in society because they are still viewed as lacking productivity in comparison to the *norm*.

Using a Critical Disabilities lens is central to my own research. According to Devlin and Pothier (2006), the goal of Critical Disability theory is to challenge various societal assumptions such as disability being equal to misfortune, the privileging of

*normality* over *abnormality*, and that "productivity is essential to personhood" (p. 2). My own personal goals of using a Critical Disabilities lens is aligned with the goals of this theory: to challenge the structures of society in order to raise awareness of disability as socially constructed in an attempt to rid the negative connotation of the word *disability*, reject a hierarchy of disability, and to break away from ableism and move toward a barrier-free community (2006). Unfortunately, however, many of the same societal struggles that the disability community has faced, struggles like acceptance and equity, has also been reflected in the feminist community as well.

### *Feminist theory*

Drawing on the work of gender theorists, this qualitative study views gender as socially constructed and historically situated. In a sense, shaped by the broader structures of gender, people come to understand and learn what it means to be an "appropriate woman" or an "appropriate man." As Lorber (1994) suggests, "gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life" (p. 54). One is told by society what it *means* to be a woman through a socially constructed identity which is given to her and informs her of what she can and cannot do, and what is gender appropriate and what is not. For example, according to Lucal (2008), if an individual does not want to conform to pre-determined gender roles, "other people will, in effect, do gender for that person by placing her or him in one and only one of the available two categories" (p. 23). This surveillance of gender ensures that normative standards of gender remain intact. In short, it is no longer tenable to understand gender as an outcome of biology or some manifestation of inner essence; the belief that, "women's social existence can be derived from some fact of their physiology" is an illusion (Butler, 1988, p. 520).

The concept of "policing" gender is an important one because it helps us understand how other people's choices are shaped. Let's take children for an example. Research has shown time and again, that if a child does not conform to the gender norms of society, they are likely to experience various forms of policing (Dutro, 2001; Higdon, 2011; Robinson, 2005). If a boy, for example, displays a desire to dress in girls' clothes, or engage in traditional female activities, he is likely to experience gender policing in the form of homophobia (Dutro, 2001).

This process of both policing and constructing gender begins at birth (Kane, 2006; Lorber, 1994). According to various authors (see, for example, Greco, 2013; Lorber, 1994; Paoletti, 2012; Pomerleau, Bolduc, Malcuit, & Cossette, 1990), when a baby is born their gender is displayed to the world through the use of the colour pink for girls and blue for boys. This "pink and blue syndrome" (Spade & Valentine, 2008, p. 4) affects a baby's nursery, clothes, and toys to name a few, which may be determined and selected based on this initial colour. No human being is brought into the world with a penchant for Barbie dolls, makeup, trucks, or G.I. Joe. Newborn children have no choice in the matter; instead, parents and others often teach them what they will like, how they will act, and what they can do (Greco, 2013). In short, these gendered choices often powerfully shape and sometimes determine the lived realities of children.

Gender, in many ways, works much like a capitalist version of bureaucracy. In Marx's view of a capitalist society, people and labor become a means of human capital where the workers themselves do not have accessibility to a variety of commodities (Adler, 2010). Instead, they must exchange their ability to work for money to buy the very goods that they themselves have produced (Adler, 2010). Further, it was through this unequal exchange that Marx saw a social stratification of society, or "the ranking of

people or groups of people within a society" in order to keep and exert control (Kerbo, 2007, p. 228). Through a deeply engrained hegemonic process (Femia, 1975), the workers accept what Marx calls the "veil of false consciousness" and only knowledge given to these workers "raises consciousness about exploitation" (Adler, 2010, p. 5). In essence, educating them about the so-called "truth" can help to release them from hegemony and from the hold of the status quo. Of course, while it is no longer accepted among many scholars that there is a particular *truth* to uncover in the Marxist sense of the phrase, the basic idea of consciousness raising can be very productive. Similarly, then, gender itself "is a process of creating distinguishable social statuses for the assignment of rights and responsibilities" (Lorber, 1994, p. 32). Thus, gender becomes a "process," much like capitalism, where the individuals themselves construct and internalize the expectations of society (men as dominant) and then act them out (Lorber, 1994).

Gender is also *stratified* from the ways in which it "ranks men above women of the same race and class" (Lorber, 1994, p. 32; see also, Risman, 2004). On a social level, stratification works by organizing individuals on a kind of axis, or framework, of power (McLeod & Nonnemaker, 1999; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Namely, access to certain resources like money as well as the achievement of a certain social status is different for certain groups, creating social inequality (McLeod & Nonnemaker, 1999). Those that have the power to begin with are those who control these types of societal resources and maintain the social hierarchy. Risman (2004) stated that "gender is deeply embedded as a basis for stratification, differentiating opportunities and constraints" (p. 28). This ranking is evident in many areas of society, perhaps most notably the workplace where, in many areas, women are promoted less often than men and men are still being paid more money than a woman doing a similar job (Bryant, Winters, & Matson, 2012; Ibarra, Carter, & Silva,

2010; Lo Sasso, Richards, Chou, & Gerber, 2011). This division again ensures that societal expectations of 'man' and 'woman' are maintained and *constructed* (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011; Lorber, 1994) and that the status quo is kept intact.

Unfortunately, constructions of what it means to be a “good” female student follows young women through to postsecondary education (Leathwood, 2012, p. 134). Postsecondary institutions continue to be sites of gender disparity in academic subjects where the traditionally difficult subjects like maths and sciences are represented as highly academic in nature and therefore, better suited for men, whereas subjects that are perceived to be less rigorous, less "academic", and more caring are better suited for women (2012). According to recent data on university enrolment in Canada, in the 2013-2014 school year roughly 30,000 men were enrolled in math and computer and information sciences programs compared to roughly 11,000 women in the same program (Statistics Canada, 2015a; Statistics Canada, 2015b). Further, architecture and engineering enrolled roughly 93,000 men compared to just over 27,000 women, while education had just over 20,000 men enrolled compared to about approximately 62,000 women (2015a; 2015b). This imagery then, shows young women entering university that it is still, in many ways, a man's world. Women may be allowed in the door, but there is still a barrier placed on them from society as to where they truly belong. To further this point, there are far fewer women teaching university courses in STEM-related fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math), which also means far fewer role models for any potential female students wanting to major in these fields (Blickenstaff, 2005; see also Kuzmin, Motskin, & Gallinger, 2015). This "probably sends a message to girls that the discipline is unattractive to women, and they should avoid it too" (2005, p. 376), which again illustrates to women that the historically more "difficult" fields, those fields

that are often the subject of much praise in society and where many leaders of this society are found, are not made for women.

The maintenance of this gender construction within academic fields continues despite a growing critique which has run alongside efforts to boost girls' self-esteem. For example, the rise of "Girl Power" rhetoric, which has been evident in recent years (Pomerantz, Raby, & Stefanik, 2013) is one such example of efforts to increase girls' self-awareness in a way that leads them to pushback against patriarchal constraints. Yet, even though there are powerful messages frequently conveyed throughout society, via educational institutions and in the media that women can do it all, have it all, and be whatever they want, women and girls are still experiencing highly sexist language, situations, and beliefs in their everyday lives and schools (Leathwood, 2013; Pomerantz et al., 2013).

The situating of men as a group over women as a group within the gender order, in terms of accumulating and securing of economic, political and social benefits has, in many ways, been an accepted part of our history. The reasons why patriarchy has persisted over the course of centuries, has to do, perhaps, with the stories we tell ourselves. For example, de Beauvoir (1949/2011) notes that in Adam and Eve, perhaps one of the world's most famous Origin stories of all time, Adam is portrayed as the level-headed, dominant male, whereas Eve is illustrated as the impatient, uncontrollable woman, a woman derived from Adam himself, who eats the forbidden fruit and brings sin to the world. These types of stories may do considerable harm to women in terms of how gender is socially constructed. In fact, the telling and retelling of these types of popular stories over time may actually aid in the formation and acceptance of these constructions as *truth* rather than something else.

Understanding the way gender is constructed to situate women as a group as "Other," helps us understand the way people differently abled are also "Othered". To put it differently, the *truths* about gender are critically important because disability "is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body, similar to what we understand as the fictions of race and gender" (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 17). Many of the same social challenges that women face, differently-abled people also face. Garland-Thomson (2011), in her work on feminist disability theory, postulated that both populations overlap in four key areas: "representation, the body, identity, and activism" (p. 18). Women and the differently-abled for example, are often represented in similar ways: weak, sick, and essentially, not normal (2011). Also, both populations run in opposition to the "appearance norms" (in terms of the body) that our society has set out for who is to be included and who is not (2011, p. 22). So, while there is no single significant event leading to the placement of men above women in the constructed order of society (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011), it is instead critical to examine the structure of the human body itself as the assumed source of this separation.

Researchers postulate that our practices, attitudes and beliefs about the human body itself are socially constructed (Lorber & Yancey-Martin, 2011; Synnott, 1992). According to Bordo (1989), "the body—what we eat, how we dress the daily rituals through which we attend to the body—is a medium of culture" (p. 13). The body as a distinct entity has no real meaning, but rather, over time, construction of meaning as related to the body is intertwined with relations of power. In particular, the social construction of the body has played a critical role in how women are viewed in areas like higher education or the corporate world (Bordo, 1989). Lorber and Yancey-Martin (2011) use the example of a male company owner hiring *only very tall* men in order to



compete on the company volleyball team. Two women were employed at the company as well, both of them also very tall. The authors described this preoccupation with height as a reflection of a society where height is viewed as a desirable male quality and therefore, because the women were also tall, it was socially acceptable to hire them (Lorber & Yancey-Martin, 2011). However, in order for women who Bordo (1989) describes as "upwardly mobile" (p. 19), to attain positions of power in universities, businesses and elsewhere, they must "embody the [so-called] 'masculine' language and values of that arena —self-control, determination, cool, emotional discipline, mastery, and so on" (p. 19). Consequently, women feel a lot of pressure to abandon the social constructions of what a female should be: kind, docile, caring, impatient, uncontrollable, and weak, yet they often face criticism for employing dominance and verbal intimidation, often considered to be more masculine traits, in their leadership roles (Eagly & Carli, 2007). By understanding the body as a social construction, society can begin to deconstruct 'truths' about women and men "by making visible cultural and social dynamics that generally are invisible to members of a society" (Lorber & Yancey-Martin, 2011, p. 285).

Gender is also performative. By this, gender scholars mean that gender is not grounded in biology; rather it is an enactment, an ongoing identity construction that one performs for others, on a moment-to-moment basis. Philosopher and gender scholar Judith Butler (1988) calls gender a "*stylized repetition of acts*" (p. 519), a performance of sorts by women and men *acting as* women and men. For Butler, these acts must be "understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler, 1988, p. 519). A young girl growing up for example, is inundated with images and messages from others about how a so-called 'normal' woman should act. Since society's ultimate goal is for that

young girl to grow up to be a "proper" woman through these messages, she will internalize these and act them out. She will perform traditional femininity in a variety of ways: wearing makeup, the desire to maintain a small body, or perhaps being soft and gentle in speech. In this continued performance of preferred gender roles throughout the course of her life, this "illusion" of gender remains. Of course, this is not to suggest that conformity to a traditional femininity is ever achieved. Many women and girls resist notions of traditional femininity in one way or another, drawing our attention to the way people have agency to resist and subvert hegemonic notions of gender. Nonetheless, in order for the findings of this study to be understood in relation to theories and constructions of both disability and gender, it is essential to establish underlying key concepts of these theories to use as a basis for this understanding.

### **Key Concepts of My Theoretical Framework**

My research will draw on several key concepts that are critical to the development of my theoretical framework: 1) power/power relations; 2) hegemony; 3) ableism; 4) intersectionality; and 5) normalization. These terms will be discussed within the following section beginning power and power relations.

#### *Power/Power Relations*

The first key concept that is critical to my theoretical framework is power and power relations. According to Foucault (1976/1990), power is disseminated throughout society through discourse. In terms of sex for example, Foucault noted that "power's hold on sex is maintained through language, or rather through the act of discourse that creates . . . a rule of law" (p. 83). In *The History of Sexuality, Volume One*, Foucault stated that "discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (pp. 100-101). For

Foucault, power could not be thought of as a dictatorship where those who are in command of societal power possess control over others who do not have it, but rather, should be thought of as having the potential for emancipation, or genuine social change. To put it a little differently, for Foucault, relations of power are not top-down, but bottom-up; they are struggled and fought over on an ongoing basis, revealing tensions and contradictions in ambiguity as they are worked out in the everyday lives of people.

In the many works of Foucault, particularly those on punishment and sexuality, he illustrates how various processes of normalization function through the use of binary constructions (Foucault, 1975/1995). Binary labels for example, such as good/bad, moral/immoral, man/woman, ability/disability, heterosexual/homosexual, and others, serve to differentiate society based on a fictional constructed divide of what is considered normal and what is not. And of course, what is considered not normal has been in the past criminalized, pathologized and marginalized (e.g., non-heterosexual identities) within society. Foucault describes the effects of "a plague-stricken town" (p. 198) as evidence of a normalizing process that brands individuals as different, as individuals venturing *outside the norm*, and then through hierarchical methods such as inspection, observation, registration and seclusion, the town is rid of the disease by way of constant surveillance and purification. One only has to glance backward, into the postwar period in Canada, and its intensification around the binary of heterosexuality/homosexuality, to begin to understand how the processes of normalization functioned in structures of power, to create *normal* youth (Gleason, 1999). Heteronormativity, according to Oswald, Blume, and Marks (2005), "is the implicit moral system or value framework that surrounds the practice of heterosexuality" (p. 144). In short, situated within a heteronormative culture, people who display good morals and socially appropriate values are also assumed to be

practicing heterosexuals; for those individuals who engage in non-heterosexual practices, comes an enormous amount of public scrutiny in a way that suggests that they are morally and ethically deficient, and by extension come to be seen as deviant (Oswald et al., 2005).

The increasing attention to gender and gender roles in the Canadian postwar period (1945-1960), fuelled by the rise of psychologists (Gleason, 1999), perhaps best illustrates how power functions to produce normative practices of society. Feminist scholars have described that time in history as "demonstrat[ing] the constructedness of 'feminine' and 'masculine' labels" (Gleason, 1999, p. 11). It was during this time period, that men were encouraged to adopt a traditional masculinity and women a traditional femininity. To be otherwise, to blur the white, hetero-normative, middle class boundaries of postwar understandings of gender and gender roles was to trigger suspicion and contempt, not to mention bring about attempts to remediate the individual back into a traditional gender identity. For instance, men were required to be breadwinners of their family, while women were strongly encouraged to not participate in the labor force in order to stay-at-home. The construction of a nuclear family as the most appropriate site to raise a so-called *normal* family, strengthens and normalizes patriarchal understandings of gender, in a way that once again privilege men as a group over women as a group. Of course, it is important to keep in mind that the discourse that conveyed the message that women, in order to raise a so-called *normal* family, should be at home was grounded in middle-class values. It was certainly the case that women from working poor and working-class backgrounds, did indeed, work and needed to work. Perhaps, understanding and conceptual use of the Panopticon would help clarify how the normalization process functions.

The imagery of Foucault's description of Bentham's "Panopticon" illustrates the previous point in many ways. According to Foucault (1975/1995), the Panopticon is a large, circular observational tower with windows on all sides which is used for observation. These objects are often seen in prisons, where the prisoners know that they are under constant surveillance (1975/1995). In this example, Foucault (1975/1995) describes the Panopticon as a symbol of collective order where power is visible at all times. He noted that the separation of individuals within a visible, divided space is a "guarantee of order" (p. 200). For example, by making individuals visible but separate within an "architectural apparatus" (p. 201) such as a school, prison, factory, or hospital, it guarantees a certain collective order in the sense that "if the inmates are convicts, there is no danger of a plot, an attempt at collective escape . . . if they are patients, there is no danger of contagion; . . . if they are schoolchildren, there is no copying, no noise, no chatter . . . " (p. 201). In short, these various buildings ensure that their inhabitants control *themselves* (1975/1995) because they understand that they are constantly visible by authority and therefore, power itself begins to function automatically (1975/1995). Yet, despite normalizing processes that teach people techniques of self-regulation, it is the relationship that people have with themselves which can then be uncovered, interpreted, and used by others (Deacon, 2002). Ultimately, discovering, uncovering and "disrupting" this *truth*, that power in society is self-regulated and automatically functioning (Foucault, 1975/1995), is the central purpose of my work with women with disabilities.

Power and power relations are important concepts in my work. In certain countries for example, postsecondary institutions have historically separated those who are assumed to "belong" from those who are assumed not to. One way schools, as particular sites for social reproduction, separate students has been through standardized

tests. Standardized tests, including IQ tests, are used by schools to "produce the 'normal' distribution of the bell-shaped curve" (Brueggemann, White, Dunn, Heifferon, & Cheu, 2001, p. 372) and schools then use these tests to "support the ideology that the poor are poor because they are stupid" (Erevelles, 2009, p. 68). In Canadian postsecondary institutions as well, persons with disabilities have been faced with issues with regard to policy and practice (Jung, 2011). For example, while all postsecondary institutions have a "*moral and legal duty* to provide accommodation, it [policy] is also designed to protect the university from unreasonable expense" (2011, p. 269). In short, in the current postsecondary climate, where competition among students is fierce and educational resources and finances are dwindling, "productivity and accountability have more weight than openness and accessibility" (2011, p. 270). Therefore, students that do not fit into the "normal distribution" accept that their non-admittance to postsecondary institutions is due to something inherently wrong with them as individuals, rather than to the broader systemic and structural issues.

Along those same lines, many disability advocates would argue that the exploitation of the disabled is also problematic. For example, like those in minority groups, those with disabilities may be segregated from gainful employment and access to postsecondary institutions (Finnie et al., 2011; Lindstrom, Doren, Miesch, 2011). In addition, females with disabilities specifically earn considerably lower amounts of money when they first begin their jobs compared to men with disabilities. Unfortunately for women who are differently abled, as research shows, this trend persists over time (Doren, Gau, Lindstrom, 2010). One unfortunate outcome for those who are differently abled is that they may become dependent on the privileged group to provide them with the economic resources they need to survive.

*Hegemony*

The second key concept to my work is *hegemony*. Foucault's belief that power can be achieved through normalization and discourse is a natural stepping-stone to Gramsci's concept of hegemony in society (Femia, 1975). Hegemony, in short, "refers to a situation wherein a social group or class is ideologically dominant" (Femia, 1975, p. 29).

According to Femia (1975), Gramsci's notion of hegemony rests on the idea that it is exercised through " 'intellectual and moral leadership', which is objectified in and exercised through the institutions of civil society, [and] the ensemble of education, religious and associational institutions" (p. 30). Similar to Foucault then, Gramsci believed that hegemonic power, which structured social classes, was not exercised by force but instead was "obtained by consent" (Femia, 1975, p. 31). For example, earlier theorists of social class such as Marx believed that society was structured as a strictly class-based system with the bourgeoisie on one side of this system, structured in direct opposition to the proletariat on the other (Femia, 1975). Gramsci on the other hand, believed that "class conflict is not just channeled by generally accepted norms: it is effectively neutralized" (Femia, 1975, p. 31) by the various institutions like schools and factories that teach what the "norms" of society are. Thus, the structuring of these norms— reflecting white, male, heterosexual, middle class values— embedded in dominant ideologies, create a hegemonic system where "class conflict eventually becomes domesticated" (Femia, 1975, p. 32).

Becoming "domesticated" then, refers to the acceptance by citizens of the social order as it is. For example, from this perspective the domesticity of societal norms has ultimately led to the consent and acceptance of the working class because they lack the conceptual tools to move outside of their social positions (Femia, 1975). This has

changed somewhat over the past several decades, as the working class now possess a greater understanding of the social hierarchy, yet this order continues to endure.

Therefore, unlike visible instances of power taking place in the form of "coercive state action" (Litowitz, 2000, p. 519), hegemony is a silent dominator. According to Litowitz (2000), "it involves subduing and co-opting dissenting voices through subtle dissemination of the dominant group's perspective as universal and natural, to the point where the dominant beliefs and practices become an intractable component of common sense" (p. 519). Thus, people become contributors in structuring, and continuing, the norms set out by those who are the most powerful within society. To put it a little differently, marginalized and or subordinate populations within any given society, either knowingly or unknowingly, perpetuate the norms and ideals set out for them by the powerful and *consent* to being active participators in a social order that typically goes against their own best interests.

In an effort to illustrate how hegemony has rendered those with disabilities as one of the societal "others," for example, Whittington-Walsh (2002) discusses its power in film. She gives the example of how, despite several successful box office films featuring non-disabled actors portraying those with disabilities, the 1932 film *'Freaks'* featured actors with real disabilities playing people with disabilities in the film (see, also, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, 1946). Whittington-Walsh (2002) contended that the director of the film, Tod Browning, gave the actors with disabilities an opportunity to challenge "the dominant culture of aesthetics" (p. 706) and "is one of the few films that does not blame the individual's disability for the cause of their disempowerment . . . and allowed the characters with disabilities emancipation" (p. 706). Perhaps because of the exploitive nature of the film when it came to representing differently abled people, it was not



received well. In fact, *Freaks* was banned by the film studio for two decades in the United States and an astounding four decades in the United Kingdom (Whittington-Walsh, 2002). Yet, according to Adams (2001), several decades later, it re-emerged and was lauded by critics, showing that "attitudes toward freaks do not always move toward condemnation, but may vacillate unevenly between acceptance and repudiation" (p. 18).

In an article about the newfound acceptance and cultish popularity of previously shunned films like *Freaks*, John Patterson describes what he calls "the weirdo element" (Patterson, 2007, Title, para. 1), where "mainstreaming . . . this defiantly marginal subculture" (2007, para. 9) became all the rage. In essence, the more off-the-wall the movie, or the more harshly the previous public distaste in the case of *Freaks*, the more cult classic hit it became. In fact, the 1930s saw a "eugenics movement" of sorts, in film (Smith, 2011). This "classic horror genre" (p. 23), with films like *Frankenstein*, terrified movie-goers with the insinuation that a deformed monster could potentially be society's ruin, and "a return to social norms" could only happen if the monster was effectively removed (p. 24). In truth, while these types of movies were being more widely distributed and "accepted," a term I use rather loosely, the culture of ableism was still alive, well, and perpetuated throughout society.

### *Normalization*

The third key concept that is central to my research is the processes of normalization. How does a particular form of identity, a particular and often narrow way of being, become thought of as *normal* by any given society? As noted previously, power normalizes, deviance becomes internalized, and people thus begin to independently reproduce the *ideal* – the *ideal man*, the *ideal woman*, the *ideal boy or girl*. For example, Gleason (1999), in her book, *Normalizing the Ideal*, noted that "normalization represents

socially and historically contingent processes whereby some behaviours and attitudes come to be labeled as normal and good while others come to be labeled as deviant and bad” (p. 8). We know from extensive sociological and historical research, for example, that these societal ideals have critical implications for women and girls. Specifically, writing about the Canadian context, Mona Gleason mentions the rise of postwar World War II psychology as powerfully contributing to and constructing the so-called norm of what it meant to be a Canadian woman in the 1950s. Psychologists, newspaper columnists, magazine writers and other popular writers of the time, never tired of conveying the message to women that they should be: good, moral, stay at home housewives whose job it was to raise good, moral children (Gleason, 1999). Of course, the so-called ideal was grounded in middle class, white, heterosexual, patriarchal values. The hope by mainstream psychologists and journalists and many other concerned adults, was that women and men, and also children would internalize these ideals in a way to produce particular kinds of traditional gendered identities. Unfortunately, during this time period, those men and women, boys and girls who did not “do” one’s gender appropriately, who were not deemed *normal* by the experts, were at times criminalized, marginalized and punished in one way or another (Kinsman & Gentile, 2010).

Foucault provides an example to illustrate the processes of normalization and its negative effects on those that do not fit this norm. Foucault (1980) outlines the story of Herculine Barbin, a woman from a noble family who was also a hermaphrodite. Herculine identified as a woman from birth but after an illicit affair with another female at her school, had two separate examinations from doctors that made the decision that she was indeed masculine, and these doctors also proceeded to give her a new, masculine name. The horrors of a confused identity that befell Herculine throughout her life caused

her to commit suicide at the age of 30, and in her final memoirs she wrote: "I have suffered much, and I have suffered alone! Alone! Forsaken by everyone! My place was not marked out in this world that shunned me, that had cursed me" (Foucault, 1980, p. 3). Similar to normalizing processes having an effect on gender, they also play an important role in the lives of those with disabilities.

In today's society, the so-called *ideal* assumes an able-bodiedness. By conflating the norm or the ideal with able-bodiedness, differently abled people become conflated with abnormality. By extension differently abled people are viewed as having a deficit, or as "lacking" something normal. Or worse, they come to be seen as having something inherently "not right" with them. Wolfensberger (1972) noted that these normative practices and "ideologies" (p. 7) may cause discriminative practices in human management fields specifically toward those with disabilities. Buildings, for example, are often constructed in such a way that show a person with a disability, or "deviant individual" that they are subhuman, a menace, sick, objects of pity, charity, ridicule, and as an eternal child or holy innocent (Wolfensberger, 1972, p. 63). A person who is considered "subhuman" for example, "usually implies an expectation that he behave in a primitive, uncontrolled [animalistic] fashion" (p. 63) and therefore, is placed in an environment where the materials cannot be destroyed and don't have many objects and parts that can be moved (Wolfensberger, 1972). According to Brueggeman et. al (2001), "our culture sees disability as handicap— something wrong with the individual" (p. 372). Therefore, until people as individuals and institutions in general are ready to accept that disability is a socially constructed phenomenon that advantages certain groups of the population at the expense of others in unfair and unjust ways, those with disabilities will continue to be marginalized in postsecondary institutions and elsewhere.

*Ableism*

The fourth key concept in my work is *ableism*. Simply put, an ableist understanding of the world holds that able-bodied people are naturally the norm, if not the *ideal*. Able-bodied people are the standard by which all other people are measured. And, by extension, an ableist worldview accepts that any so-called disability is an error or a mistake of nature, and a person with a disability is in a lessened human condition. According to Hehir (2007) ableism is what he calls "society's pervasive negative attitude about disability" (p. 9). One example includes a young girl with a "curiosity about the world around her, lively imagination, and a love of picture books," and who also happens to have dyslexia (p. 9). While her school provides her with the resources she needs, "it also expected her to read grade-level texts at the same speed as her nondisabled peers" (p. 9). This push for normalcy, to be the same as her peers who did not have disabilities, not only caused her to fall behind in school, but hate it as well. Ableism, in short, is the preference of *normal*, nondisabled individuals over those with disabilities because *not* having a disability is "superior" (Storey, 2007, p. 56). Unfortunately, this belief is widely held throughout much of contemporary Canadian society.

Ableism as an ideology is worked out and embedded in many areas of Canadian society including schools and governmental policies (England, 2003; Hibbs & Pothier, 2006; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Vasquez, 2011; Wong, 2012), the media (Haller, Dinca-Panaitescu, Rioux, Laing, Vostermans, & Hearn, 2012), the law (MacPherson, 2006; Tyjewski, 2006), government assistance programs and the workplace in general (Chouinard, 2010; England, 2003; Wilton, 2006). Due to the fact that "ableism privileges speech over sign language, walking over wheeling, independence over interdependence and care giving over receiving" (Salmon, 2013, p. 354; see also, Hehir, 2002), the

discovery of its pervasiveness within these major fields is not surprising, yet at the same time quite troublesome. I will take Canadian immigration policy, as a clear-cut example, to illustrate the way in which the ideology of ableism functions to shape in powerful ways the everyday lives of people who are differently abled.

Canadian immigration policy, according to researchers, has participated "in the systemic exclusion of people with disabilities from acquiring citizenship status" (Wong, 2012, p. 5). Wong (2012) points out that, people given permission to enter Canada are chosen "based on how desirable they are, or how well they fit into Canada's national imagination" (p. 11). This may be due to the fact that immigrants and migrant workers permitted entry into the country are often done so with the expectation that they will work and thus, make an economic contribution in the capitalist sense of the word (2012). Of course, it is important to note that new Canadians are desirable as they are one of the biggest suppliers of cheap labour. Canada needs a constant variety of types of workers, including professionals, who are able-bodied. However, this demand for able-bodied immigrant workers, automatically positions people with disabilities as "un-desirable". People with disabilities, as understood from an ablest perspective, are rendered largely "unproductive and burdensome to society" (2012, p. 15). To put bluntly, they are discriminated against in a capitalist system that requires and at the same time promotes the able-bodied, productive citizen as the so-called ideal (2012).

Of course, the assumption that differently abled people cannot contribute in any meaningful way to society is misguided. As Wong (2012) argues, this does not mean that differently abled people are naturally incapable of being productive citizens, "but simply that they are understood as unable by the state and by capitalists in a system geared towards able-bodiedness" (p. 16). In fact, Walgreens, a large American pharmaceutical

company, has hired hundreds of individuals with disabilities within their brand new distribution facility (Kaletta, Binks, & Robinson, 2012). Within this facility, it was found that employees with disabilities were just as productive as those workers who did not have disabilities and, in some areas, those with disabilities were actually found to be *more* productive and far less likely to leave the company after a year of employment than those without disabilities (2012). Unfortunately though, those with disabilities continue to be targets of ableism throughout the workplace and society in general.

In Canada, workplaces and services in place to achieve meaningful work for persons with disabilities continue to suffer from ableism. Government assistance programs, some of which are designed to help those with disabilities learn important job skills as well as earning and maintaining work, are falling behind in terms of providing these services, particularly for women with disabilities (Chouinard, 2010). Women with disabilities in the study noted, for example, that there are still major systemic barriers that they need to overcome in order to have meaningful employment opportunities, as "the most frequently cited barriers to employment were negative employer attitudes (e.g. views that women with disabilities were less productive workers) and lack of or insufficient accommodation in the workplace" (2010, p. 152). While men may experience these kinds of barriers as well, this particular study focused only on women. Many of these barriers, however, are coming from the very policies that are put into place to help achieve equitable standards in Canadian society for people with disabilities.

Ableism, in many ways is political in nature. One of the ways in which ableism functions politically is its codification in law and social policies (Vazquez, 2011). The *Employment Equity Act* for example, was put into place in Canada to achieve equity for marginalized groups in society, such as those with disabilities (England, 2003). However,

"it does not adequately address informal workplace practices" which are often sites of discrimination for those with disabilities (2003, p. 447). In fact, "there is virtually no information available that relates to the creation of an inclusive workplace culture" (Agocs, 2002, p. 261; see also, England, 2003). This may be because the Act, created in 1987 and renewed in 1996 to address concerns from many interest groups, "contains weaknesses reflective of political compromises" (Agocs, 2002, p. 261). In England's (2003) study on the major banks in Canada for example, she found that while there have been some improvements regarding employment for persons with disabilities such as women with disabilities earning a greater number of managerial positions, over a fourteen year span the number of people with disabilities being hired by these banks in Toronto was virtually the same, and these numbers were actually down nationally. Essentially then, the attitudes of workplace peers and those in managerial positions continue to be ". . . a significant barrier to persons with disabilities gaining access to training, meaningful work and job promotions (and pay increases)" (England, 2003, p. 433) and since, "ableist barriers also include discriminatory and pejorative attitudes and practices" (England, 2003, p. 432) ableism within the workplace remains alive and well. Unfortunately, however, "the politics of ableism" (Wolbring, 2008, p. 252) is also played out in schools.

Schools in many parts of North America continue to be sites of ableism (Hehir, 2002, 2007; Hibbs & Pothier, 2006; Kattari, 2015; Storey, 2007). Schools for example, "often advocate multiculturalism and acceptance of differences, [but] disability and ableism are often overlooked in this advocacy" (Storey, 2007, p. 56). Within schools today, "negative cultural assumptions about disability" persist, as well as the need from others to conform to ableist assumptions which contend that it is not desirable to have a disability and therefore, the person with the disability must change and conform to

normative ideals (Hehir, 2002, p. 4). These ableist assumptions continue to have a profound impact on those students with disabilities, such as those who are deaf, visually impaired, and have dyslexia (Hehir, 2002). For example, while American Sign Language (ALS) has been proven to increase literacy skills for students who are deaf, schools continue to push the ideals of oralism (learning to lip read and speak) which has hindered their progress in a significant way (Hehir, 2002). For visually impaired students on the other hand, schools remain partisan against the teaching of Braille as it "is a disability-specific method of reading that many nondisabled people view as unacceptable" (Hehir, 2002, p.10). While it may be possible that some people who are visually impaired do not want to use Braille, this does not negate systemic issues around its use in schools. The inability of schools to adapt to a diverse student body in order to create a more successful, equitable environment for all students is also reflected within higher education.

Some postsecondary schools continue to perpetuate ableism and ableist practices. At the University of Victoria for example, students with disabilities are often challenged well beyond any nondisabled student to acquire appropriate accommodations, administered to them in the proper way (Hibbs & Pothier, 2006). This may be because the University of Victoria is still operating under the biomedical model of disability, using language in their accommodation policy that asserts "the assumption is that the limitation or need is within the person and it is results from impairment" (p. 204). Further, "microaggressions" are often shared by others who are nondisabled with the person with the disability, such as calling someone with a visual impairment "lucky" because they are allowed to have their service dog accompany them to class (Kattari, 2015, p. 383), or because they get extra time on tests and exams. In addition, according to Kattari (2015), there are beliefs people have about students with disabilities that are based in ableism as



well, such as the fact that *all* students with disabilities should be registered to receive some type of accommodation and disability-related services.

Ableism is a powerful ideology that has fueled a variety of unjust practices that have taken hold in many key institutions throughout Ontario and elsewhere. It goes without saying, then, that for persons with disabilities, equity cannot truly be achieved while ableist beliefs still inform the way institutions work. People who hold institutional power, among others, must be willing to first examine and then perhaps change problematic policies and unjust practices that have been ingrained into our everyday lives. However, while ableism may be affecting all persons with disabilities negatively, the intersection of both gender and disability may also cause additional issues and disadvantages for women with disabilities.

### *Intersectionality*

Intersectionality is an analytical tool that feminist and other critical scholars use in order to examine the relationship among identity, disability/ability, gender, and other systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality rejects the single category framework (e.g., only disability, only social class, only gender), and instead explores the various and complex ways in which multiple factors such as social class, race, age, and able-bodiedness overlap, interact, and intersect with, say, gender to shape the multiple dimensions of all people's experiences. Thus, the study of identity is far more complicated than many early writers and scholars first imagined. A person can be privileged in some ways and not privileged in others. For example, due to structural and systemic oppression, being born a straight, white, heterosexual middle-class able-bodied male affords access to multiple systems of privilege that are simply not available to disabled, Indigenous and non-white people. Specifically, the *intersectionality* between

disability and gender that results in a double discrimination (Emanuel, 2000; Habib, 1995) for women with disabilities is a critical feature to my work. In fact, according to Garland-Thomson (2011), "feminist theory can be deepened by a disability analysis" (p. 18) in the areas of representation, the body, identity, and activism. For example, the representations of women as well as people with disabilities are similar in the sense that they both reside under the category of *other*. An example of this "othering" is how women are often viewed as being "misbegotten men" (Tuana, 1989, p. 147, also referenced in Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 18) in comparison to their male counterparts just as persons with physical disabilities may be seen as having "unruly bodies" (Erevelles, 2000, p. 33), making them secondary beings in society (Garland-Thomson, 2011). However, despite the plight facing both groups individually "women with disabilities, even more intensely than women in general, have been cast in the collective cultural imagination as inferior, lacking, excessive, incapable, unfit, and useless" (Garland-Thomson, 2005, p. 1567). Thus, studying the intertwining of feminism and disability studies is extremely important as it may provide additional insight into the complex and at times challenging plight of women with disabilities that might have only been recognized previously as simply a "gender problem" or a "disability problem".

The entanglement of disability and gender has worked to push both movements forward in important ways. According to Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009), "disability studies engaged with feminism at a time when distinct groups were being marginalised on account of their race, class or sexuality" (p. 59). However, many women felt that the basis of Disability Studies, the social model of disability was being left out of important discussions (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Critical Disabilities Studies is committed to improving the lives of all differently abled people, but with a particular focus on

women (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). The recognition of the intersectionality between gender and disability plays an important role in improving disabled women's lives.

Currently, some researchers are beginning to see the benefits of a feminist disability framework (Garland-Thomson, 2011; Jung, 2011; Schur, 2004; Wehmeyer & Rousso, 2001). This framework is similar to the goals of Critical Disability theory, and encompass "an identity category and cultural concept" (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 17) that feminists and those with disabilities share. For example, binary language like ability/disability (2011) has critical implications for women and the disabled as they share a commonality: "disability, like femaleness, is not a natural state of corporeal inferiority, inadequacy, excess, or a stroke of misfortune. Rather, disability is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body" (p. 17). Thus, a deeper understanding of disability and gender as an intersection can give researchers, practitioners, and policymakers a better understanding of how alliances formed for social justice can create change for all parties involved and the larger society as a whole.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the proposed study is to explore the educational and social experiences of current undergraduate females with physical disabilities and those with learning challenges who have at least one year of undergraduate education at one Ontario university. Students with disabilities and other marginalized groups have typically been underrepresented in educational research (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2010), and on university campuses across Ontario (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2003). The underrepresentation of females

with physical disabilities and learning challenges in the university context has made it critical to explore the experiences of these two populations in order to begin addressing issues of equity in the educational context, at the same time to help build a more just and fair world for all Canadians.

### **Research Questions**

The central research question that will be addressed in this study is: How do undergraduate females with physical and learning challenges at one Ontario university navigate and negotiate their academic and social contexts? The guiding questions that will shape the proposed study will be:

- a) What is the academic experience of undergraduate females with physical disabilities and learning challenges in the university context?
- b) What is the experience of undergraduate females with physical disabilities and learning challenges in terms of navigating the social world within the university context?

### CHAPTER III

#### METHODOLOGY

Using methodologies that would be suitable for a study of this type and with this population was particularly important. According to Cole, (2009) approaches to research are critical, particularly for those that care about social justice and want to bring about societal change. For the proposed study, qualitative research methods were utilized. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) stated that "qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world" (p. 3) which allows the researcher themselves to ask open-ended, thoughtful questions of their participants in order to collect data for their study and analyze that data for themes (Creswell, 2005). Therefore, qualitative research "consists of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible . . . [which] turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). These "representations" (2005, p. 3) in fact, had particular importance for this study overall.

In this study, I used semi-structured interviews in order to obtain the personal narratives of women with physical disabilities and women with learning challenges to understand their experiences in the context of one Ontario university. In qualitative research, oral histories are particularly useful when studying women because they, "provide an invaluable means of generating new insights about women's experiences of themselves in their worlds" (Anderson & Jack, 1998, p. 157). Listening to women describe their gendered experiences provides critical and feminist researchers with empirical evidence to begin to address structural issues that work against their own best interests. In addition, oral histories of persons with disabilities are particularly important because they challenge "accepted, formal history, the history from dominant voices well

established in unequal power relations" (French & Swain, 2006, p. 383). To put it differently, gathering the stories of women with disabilities brings to the surface voices and experiences that have not been heard in the past. From an intersectionality perspective, being able to understand the "lived experience" of women with disabilities can bring to the forefront new challenges and ways of moving forward perhaps not previously recognized (Cole, 2009, p. 567). In this study, a personal narrative allowed the participants to share their stories about one key part of their lives, such as their experiences both socially and academically in postsecondary education (Chase, 2005; Creswell, 2005) because, "narrative can offer texts which are open to different readings—interpretations—while still being faithful to the teller" (Cole, 2009, p. 572), and have, "the capacity to recognize people's strengths and engage people in active, meaning-making dialogues" (Fraser, 2004, p. 181). It becomes very important therefore, to gather a number of interesting stories that can actively create these meanings.

For the purposes of this research, 16 participants were included. Fraser (2004) stated that it is mostly smaller studies that employ personal narrative methodologies because these studies may yield richer, more complex analysis. Creswell (2005) also noted that "many narrative studies examine only a single individual, [but a researcher] may study several individuals in a project, each with a different story that may conflict with or be supportive of each other" (p. 486). In the beginning stages of this study, recruiting ten participants was my initial goal. At the time, recruiting ten participants allowed me to reach the maximum number of participants for this study, and, should a few participants drop out of the study, I would still be in the general (6-10) range that I was looking to achieve. By choosing 6-10 participants, my study reflected similar research for women with disabilities and persons with disabilities in general, that have

used narrative methodologies via interviews in the recent past (Diez, 2010; Medved & Brockmeier, 2008; Petersen, 2009; Taub et al., 2004; Valeras, 2010).

Given that the intention of this study is to be inclusive in nature, and due to the fact that a learning challenge may often be an *invisible* challenge, many potential participants for this study may not have disclosed this information to the Disability Services Office on campus. In part then, this study allowed people to self-identify as "challenged" who may not have necessarily used disability services. Also, this approach gave me the opportunity to gather narrative stories from someone who may have a learning challenge and be in a wheelchair which could add even more rich, meaningful narratives than if they had simply been excluded from the study.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

The basis of narrative inquiry is the telling of a story to understand human experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2005; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Wang & Geale, 2015). According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), "the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (p.2). One cannot discuss narrative inquiry as a methodological approach without first noting its beginning within the field of education itself. It first emerged in the year 1990 when Connelly and Clandinin used it in the field of education to gather the stories of educators as a way to develop relationships between the narrator and listener as well as acknowledging the importance of participant voice as a fundamental piece of this methodology (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2005; Wang & Geale, 2015). Thus, despite the participant sharing their personal story *first*, it is collaborative in nature, where the researcher (listener) and participant (narrator) situate themselves within the story in a sort of "mutual storytelling" process where "both voices are heard" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4).

Therefore, using narrative inquiry for the current study may perhaps be an ideal methodology for gathering the story of postsecondary *students* as well.

Narrative inquiry is not just another component of qualitative research, but rather has its own place within it (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) note that distinctions exist that mark narrative researchers as such. For one, “what counts as stories, the kinds of stories they choose to study, or the methods they use for study vary” (2007, p.5). Some for example, may regard metaphor to find meaning in stories while others may use the themes as the basis for analysis (2007). Yet, one cannot become a true “narrative inquirer” according to Pinnegar and Daynes (2007), until a person makes the narrative “turn” and has an understanding of the interactive relationship between the researcher and participant as well as that our own knowledge is situated within our own privilege and experiences, “and finally that narrative knowing is essential to our inquiry” (p.7). Narrative inquiry research then, is much like planting a tree. The sharing of a story is much like a seed being planted into the ground. While a seed is cultivated by elements like the sun and water, a story is cultivated by the conversation between the narrator and listener. Further, just like any living thing, harsh weather may impact it, much like the telling of difficult stories. Over time, these stories may branch off into different directions as they reveal themselves.

When it comes to the actual writing of the narrative, the process of reflexivity is an important one. Narrative inquiry can be transformative for both the researcher and storyteller, and as such, “. . . a shared narrative construction and reconstruction through inquiry [is created]” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 5; see also, Stremmel, 2014). While there can, for example, be a variety of different methods used to collect the data (such as interviews, field notes, letters, or journaling), the researcher has to be especially aware



that they are writing the narrative from “multiple I’s” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 9). In short, our perspectives and experiences as researchers are reflected in these stories and “. . . our stories are often restoried and changed as we, as teachers and/or researchers, “give back” to each other ways of seeing our stories” (1990, p. 9). Therefore, our perspectives are coming from multiple places of experience (for myself this can mean as a woman, as a researcher, as a student, or as a teacher to name a few). Within narrative this can be a complex process as “. . . the practices drawn out in the research situation are lodged in our personal knowledge of the world” (1990, p. 10). However, while reflexivity in the telling is critical, the goal is not in writing *our* (the researcher’s) story, but rather to keep the focus on the participant voice (1990). Focusing on the story of the participants in this study for example, may allow me to re-story and share what I have learned with the participants in order to facilitate transformation in postsecondary research.

In this way, narrative inquiry can hold power. This may be especially true for marginalized groups such as those with disabilities that have been *powerless* in society to this point. Like myself, other researchers who work from a social justice perspective have used narrative inquiry in their research as well (see, for example, Phillion & Wang, 2011). Not only can stories be incredibly powerful, but they also contribute greatly to how we make sense of the world and therefore, come with great responsibility and should be taken seriously (Huber & Steeves, 2013). Sharing their stories can give those with disabilities an opportunity to add their voice to dominant discourses of the disability experience as it “. . . thus reveals values and norms that escape our own account of ourselves” (Clifford, 2013, para. 17). According to Huber and Steeves (2013), the power of narrative has “. . . tremendous potential for pedagogy in classrooms, schools,

universities, and communities” (p. 216). Since the aim of this current study is to create meaning-making dialogues, narrative inquiry can contribute in positive ways.

### **Study Recruitment**

Recruitment for my study began following Research Ethics Board approval at the beginning of September 2014. Recruitment of all participants was from the studied population at one Ontario university. The recruitment of participants for this study was conducted using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling requires that "researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon" (Creswell, 2005, p. 206). Specifically, homogenous sampling occurred because the participants in this study were chosen based on their particular membership to the subgroup of women with either a learning challenge or a physical disability (Creswell, 2005). The self-identifications of these women may not fit a strict definition of physical disability or learning challenge. Rose for example, self-identified as having a physical disability (fibromyalgia and lupus specifically) which is often invisible, but can also manifest itself in visible ways.

Three methods for recruitment were used. First, relevant students were contacted by email by the Students with Disability Services Office. The Letter of Information (Appendix B) for participation in the study was included in this email. Those who met the criteria and wished to participate in the study were given instruction to contact me either by email or phone. Second, students from the Disability Studies program were sent the Letter of Information for this study by the Social Work graduate secretary. Interested and applicable students were again asked to contact me by email if they were interested in participating in the study. The reason for recruiting through the Disability Studies program was because, generally, there is a relatively high population of students with

disabilities enrolled in this program which would greatly improve my pool of potential study participants. Third, another recruitment tool that I employed were posters throughout designated public areas of the university in order to reach participants who may not be a part of the other two recruitment populations. For example, students that have not self-identified with the Disability Services office on campus and students who are not taking any classes within the Disability Studies program may have also wanted to share their story and be included in this study. My email address was provided on these posters, and potential participants were once again asked to contact me via email if they were interested in participating in my study. Following the use of these recruitment methods, several interested students made email contact with me.

In the end, 16 participants sent an email agreeing to participate in this study. Four of these women had previously earned a diploma from a local community college but were still included as participants in this study as they were current undergraduate students at the time the study was conducted. Further, a few women who expressed interest in the study via email were not eligible, since they were in graduate programs at the university and therefore, did not fit the criteria of being current undergraduate students.

### **The Participants**

There were 16 total participants in this study. Each name given for the participants below is the pseudonym that they chose for themselves prior to the start of the semi-structured interview. In addition, all participants in this study self-identified as having either a physical disability or a learning challenge prior to the interview. In total, 13 women in this study self-identified as having a learning challenge and 3 self-identified as having a physical disability. The invisibility or visibility of their disabilities were not

determined. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 31 years. In addition, ethnicity in this study was revealed only for the women who self-identified this during the interview process. Four participants in this study had two year diplomas from a local community college before attending university as their first undergraduate degree. Backgrounds of each individual participant are as follows:

**Natalie** is student in her mid-twenties in the combined program of social work and disability studies and is working on a political science minor. She has a self-identified learning challenge, specifically Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) as well as depression and anxiety<sup>1</sup>.

**Rose** is student in her late twenties just completing her Bachelor of Arts with the intention of applying to the Faculty of Education next year. She has a self-identified physical disability, specifically fibromyalgia and lupus. Rose mentioned that her self-identified physical disability has implications for her on campus as she sometimes cannot make it through an entire class day due to the physical discomfort she encounters on a daily basis. She has been taking courses this semester at the main campus of the university, online, as well another satellite site at a different city in the province. Rose and I met twice, once for the actual interview and again for a follow-up at her request.

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<sup>1</sup> This was Natalie's self-identification. The correct term is ADHD-primarily inattentive.

**Marie** is a student in her early twenties and in her fourth year of the Movement Science program in the Faculty of Human Kinetics. She has a self-identified learning challenge, specifically a memory-based learning disability, as well as anxiety.

**Anita** is a student in her early twenties and in her third year of university. She is double-majoring in French and psychology. Anita has a self-identified learning challenge, specifically with communication, where she has difficulty with spelling and comprehension. She also identified as a racial minority.

**Amélie** is a student in her mid-twenties and in her third year of the social work and disability studies program. She previously obtained an arts diploma from a local community college. Amélie has a self-identified physical disability, and, during the course of our interview, also self-identified as a Black female. Although Amélie did indicate limitations with her back, arms, and legs, she did not elaborate further. She and I met twice, once for the actual interview and again for a follow-up at her request.

**Anne** is an international student from China. She is in her late teens. Her ability to speak English was very good as she attended an international high school back in China with some Canadian teachers. She is majoring in disability studies and psychology. Anne has a self-identified physical disability, specifically a visual impairment where she is partially sighted. Travelling overseas to get her study at a university was the first time she went to a new country.

**Jenn** is a student in her late teens and in her second year of the physics program at the university. She has a self-identified learning challenge, specifically Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, a written language disorder, and she has also been diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder.

**Maria** is a political science major in her early twenties. She has a self-identified learning challenge, specifically bipolar 2 and multiple personality disorder. This may affect learning as dissociative identity disorders can cause a person's memory to become disorganized (Psychology Today, 2016). During the course of the interview, Maria shared many of her personal social and academic experiences that were at times, very emotional for her.

**Michelle** is a nursing student in her mid-twenties. Since beginning her postsecondary degree she switched programs from social work to nursing. She has a self-identified learning challenge. She explains this to people as having dyslexia, with challenges in processing speeds, writing, and math.

**Joy** is a student in her early twenties majoring in social work. She has a self-identified learning challenge, specifically a global learning disability in reading, writing, and mathematics. She also does not have a working memory. Not having a working memory can significantly impact learning as it can interfere with the retention of information that she requires from course lectures and notes (American Psychiatric Association, 2013a). She also self-identified as non-status First Nations woman.

**Melanie** is a student in her early twenties and in her third year of the psychology program. She has a self-identified learning challenge, specifically a Learning Disorder not otherwise specified, Disorder of Written Expression, Disorder of Mathematics, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder combined type, Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Panic Disorder. These can affect learning in multiple ways. Having difficulty in written expression for example, can negatively influence any written work being submitted for assessment and evaluation. In postsecondary education particularly, being able to express oneself clearly through writing is often critical to school success.

**Brooke** is a student in the Faculty of Education in her late teens. She is also Joy's younger sister. She has a self-identified learning challenge which she did not wish to elaborate on. Brooke shared a lot about herself and her academic and social experiences as a student with a disability.

**Adelaide** is a student in her early twenties majoring in biochemistry with Honours. She is now in the second half of her fourth year, as she took the last winter semester off. She has a self-identified learning challenge, specifically Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and just recently began taking medication.

**Michapentimento** is a student in her mid twenties doing a double major in psychology and criminology and a double minor in studies of sexuality and disability studies. She also has a diploma from a local community college which she received prior to entering her university program. She has a self-identified learning challenge, specifically a non-verbal learning disability.

**Anna** is a student in her early twenties and in the combined social work and disability studies program. She previously received an Educational Assistant diploma from a local community college prior to attending university. She has a self-identified learning challenge, which includes Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Panic Disorder with agoraphobia, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and depression. There are a few others that she did not wish to disclose.

**Kelly** is a student in her early thirties majoring in psychology. She graduated with her Bachelor of Arts previously, but has now returned to university to upgrade to an Honours degree. She also previously received a diploma in police foundations from a local community college prior to beginning her university degree. She is also a member of the Canadian army and has self-identified as an Aboriginal woman. She has a self-identified learning challenge, specifically Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

### **Data Collection**

In this study, personal narratives were obtained via semi-structured interviews. According to Chase (2005), narrative research that utilizes an interview approach "aim[s] specifically at transforming the interviewer-interviewee relationship into one of narrator and listener" (p. 660). Conducting narrative research for this study consisted first, of having a "conversational" type of interview (Creswell, 2005, p. 477; see also, Fraser, 2004) with each participant in a private room at the Faculty of Education at the university from which participants were recruited. The rooms that the interviews took place in were assigned by the Faculty of Education at a convenient time for the participants. During the



interview it was critically important to listen to the participants' stories and keep a journal or re-listen to the audiotapes of the interview after it took place in order to, "describe the feelings that emerge[d]" (Fraser, 2004, p. 186). For example, the journal notes consisted of body language of the participants or the emotions felt by myself as a listener of the personal stories (Fraser, 2004). Interviews for this study ranged anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour and a half in length, depending on how much information the participant was willing to share. This reflects similar studies utilizing personal narratives (see, for example, Johnsson, Fornander, Rutqvist, & Olsson, 2010). For example, Fraser (2004) suggests several questions for the researcher to consider during this initial phase including "What 'sense' do you get from each interview?" and, "How are emotions experienced during and after the interview?" (p. 187). An oral history methodology is popular for "challeng[ing] assumptions, [and] develop[ing] a fuller, more rounded democratic account" (French & Swain, 2006, p. 385) than perhaps other types of methodologies could, particularly for persons with disabilities whose voices and stories have been relatively silenced (French & Swain, 2006; Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008). Since a personal narrative methodology is not just about the participant, but rather, the norms, structures, and institutions that shape the individual's story, it was important for me as the researcher to "focus on the connections" *between* the outside forces and the individual themselves (Maynes et al., 2008, p. 3). In order to help participants in this study to feel comfortable sharing their experiences in postsecondary education, I ensured participant confidentiality by discussing the potentially sensitive nature of the topic for those involved with the study, and therefore, reiterated the importance of not sharing any study information with others. This followed the recommendation of the Research Ethics Board. In addition, all participants were treated with respect as they were in an inclusive

environment, free of any judgments toward them. This was important as participants in this study shared personal information about themselves that might have been uncomfortable for them. For example, they were asked to share their own experiences as a student with a physical disability or learning challenge in a postsecondary environment, as well as particular instances in their university experiences (social interactions, academic experiences, etc.) that may have been difficult for them to share.

At the start of the semi-structured interviews, it was important to begin with a broad, open-ended question so that the participant themselves can guide the direction their own personal story takes in some way (Valeras, 2010; see also, Polkinghorne, 1995). For example, the first question that was asked of participants in this study was, “Could you please tell me your story about your experiences thus far as an undergraduate student with a (physical disability or learning challenge) at [a university in southern Ontario]?” (Mian, 2007). By allowing the participants to speak freely and openly about their personal experiences as a student with a disability on campus, it may have generated better, more in-depth responses than a very specific, direct "interview-type" question. It also allowed me as the researcher to listen attentively to the women (Anderson & Jack, 1991; see also, Fraser, 2004; Mian, 2007). Giving the participant the opportunity to share these experiences, good or bad, may also have helped them feel that they are telling and sharing *their* story, perhaps something that they have not had a chance to do previously.

Since the research questions for this study were created to understand and explore the experiences of women with physical disabilities and learning challenges, particularly academically and socially, it was critical that the remaining interview questions were structured to reflect this goal. Therefore, after the initial question the participants were asked to discuss their most positive, as well as their most challenging, experience of being

a person with either a physical disability or learning challenge on campus. This again, allowed participants to really think about and discuss their experiences as a whole, sharing both potentially hurtful and happy memories as a student. Then, participants were asked whether or not they believe that they have been successful academically as a student and what contributed to that success. This question was followed by asking the participants to describe what could help make their experiences more successful. These questions were crucial to this study as they allowed the participants to identify for *themselves* what “successful academically” means. It also gave them the opportunity to speak about, and identify, things that have helped them achieve this personal definition of “success” and also speak about and identify things that could be improved upon. Due to the fact that it was unknown prior to the start of the interview whether some of the participants in the study disclosed their disability and/or registered with the Disability Services office on campus, the question was asked of the participants whether or not they have accessed or registered for these services, and their reasons for choosing to do so or not. The last few questions of the semi-structured interview focused on the social aspects of a postsecondary student. For example, the participants were asked whether they have been active in any clubs or social events on campus and their reasons for either choosing to participate or not. Then, they were asked to describe their participation in these events. These questions regarding social life on campus was particularly important to understand participant experiences, as social life and events are often a large part of a student’s postsecondary experience. Finally, the last set question of the interview asked the participants to describe their thoughts about their university being an inclusive and welcoming environment for all people. Since this was a semi-structured interview, other questions, answers, and thoughts were generated by myself based on the responses that

the participants gave during the interview. For example, the topic of mentorship was something that many participants brought up and discussed during the interview and that was something I had not anticipated prior to creating the questions. Prior to stopping the tape, the participants had an opportunity to add any additional comments to the interview that they did not get a chance to share previously. A copy of proposed questions that were during semi-structured interviews can be seen in full in Appendix C. After the tape had been stopped, participants were given a \$10 Tim Horton's gift card as their study incentive.

### **Data Analysis**

Finally, because there are a variety of ways "in how investigators employ the concept of personal narrative" (Riessman, 2000, p. 171), a thematic analysis (Ellis, 2004; Riessman, 2005) was used to analyze the data. This type of analysis "is the typical representational strategy, with case studies or vignettes providing illustration" (Riessman, 2005, p. 2). Since my study was a narrative study with multiple participants, this type of analysis was ideal to choose as it is particularly "useful for theorising across a number of cases —finding common thematic elements across research participants and the events they report" (2005, p. 3).

In order to analyze the stories by theme properly, steps were taken. First, following the interview, the data were transcribed. Fraser (2004) noted that, "researchers may (or may not) attempt to 'clean up the speech'; that is, remove comments made by interviewers, [and] erase repetition and sentences that are not finished" (p. 187). Therefore, I did choose to do this in my transcriptions of participant data in this study. At the end of the transcription process, participants were given the opportunity to meet with me again and re-read the comments they made in order to clarify them further or make

changes if necessary (Fraser, 2004), which is an important part of the collaboration process between the researcher and participant in narrative research (Creswell, 2005). Two participants did want to meet with me again and go over the transcriptions of their interviews. Both were satisfied with the transcriptions and also either clarified or added additional comments. One participant requested the removal of one word from a section of her transcription, which was done immediately. The digital audio recording and transcriptions of the interviews were completed by myself, and, since narratives "...require interpretation when used as data in social research" (Riessman, 2005, p. 2), things like field notes and transcripts from the interviews were able to aid in this process (2005). Also, asking myself "What are the common themes in each transcript?" (Fraser, 2004, p. 190) made it easier to classify the information from individual participants before connecting them as a whole. Following this process, according to Fraser (2004), "scanning across different domains of experience" (p. 191) is important because it may lead to new insights into participant understandings of things like social structures, and their impact on the participants themselves (2004). Simply, looking at what Fraser (2004) calls "structural aspects of stories" (p. 192), the researcher can scan for comments "made about the influence of public policies and/or social systems" (p. 192). Then, it is important for the researcher to connect the participant stories to popular discourses (Fraser, 2004; Riessman, 2005), by considering, for instance, "What do the stories say about the (multiple) lived experiences of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, age, dis/ability?" (Fraser, 2004, p. 193). It also should be noted that there is no right or wrong analysis in narrative research, but researchers need to have confidence and 'own' their analysis, while still respecting that others may have a different view (Fraser, 2004). According to Polkinghorne (2007), "Storied texts serve as evidence for personal meaning,

not for the factual occurrence of the events reported in the stories" (p. 479). In addition, in narrative research specifically, looking for both similarities and differences between participant stories (Fraser, 2004) is a crucial step. Lastly, during the analysis phase of this narrative research, maintaining a respectful tone toward participants, making fair and just interpretations, and making the analysis relevant to the research questions, among other things (Fraser, 2004), are crucial for the success of this study, and were done with the utmost care and consideration for all involved.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Prior to beginning the data collection for this study, Research Ethics Board approval at the university of the current study was sought. Following the submission of the proper documentation, this study was approved in September, 2014. In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants in this study, each participant was informed that they may choose their own pseudonym (see, for example, Fraser, 2004; French & Swain, 2006; Petersen, 2009), which was used on all documents related to this study including audio transcriptions, the dissertation itself, and any subsequent publications of the data. In addition, all documents related to this study will be kept in a locked filing cabinet for a period of five years and myself and my research advisor will be the sole people to have access to these documents at any given time. Further, a person who worked at Student Disability Services at the university concerned in the study made contact via email with potential participants who had registered for disability services for the present school year in order to pass along the relevant Letter of Information (Appendix B; university seal has been removed to protect confidentiality) and Consent to Participate in Research forms (Appendix A; university seal has been removed to protect confidentiality). The potential participants then read the information forms and all made

contact with me via email to share their willingness to participate in the study. At the individual interviews participants were encouraged to ask questions and to ask for help understanding and filling out the relevant forms should they have required it. In addition, all instructions and forms given at the interviews were read aloud to ensure understanding, unless the participant requested to read it independently before consenting, and questions were encouraged. Participants were also informed that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and all information they provided could be erased if they so chose. At the end of the interview, participants were given a list of local mental health agencies in case they wished to contact them if the information discussed in the interviews brought up painful memories for them. In addition, after the completion of the interviews, participants were given the option to review the transcriptions of their interviews in order to clarify or elaborate on any statements they made previously (Fraser, 2004). Two of the women did wish to have a follow-up meeting, at which time they clarified and added to the statements they made previously, and went through their individual transcripts to ensure they were satisfied with the data they provided.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### **Introduction**

After analyzing the data presented by all study participants through semi-structured interviews, it was evident that there were several critical components that influenced the academic and social experiences of women with physical disabilities and learning challenges in the postsecondary school context. Major themes were classified into three main subcategories: 1) The Politics of Women and Disability in Academia; 2) The Experience of Women and Disability in Postsecondary Social Life; and 3) The Bureaucracy of Women and Disability on Campus. Within these subcategories, the themes that emerged following a thorough analysis of the data will be discussed in further depth below.

#### **The Politics of Women and Disability in Academia**

##### *Issues with Professors*

Women in this study had both positive and negative experiences when it came to dealing with their professors and teaching assistants regarding their disability. This is not entirely surprising as some research has shown that, in general, university faculty feel positive toward students with disabilities (Hong & Himmel, 2009; Murray, Wren, & Keys, 2008; Skinner, 2007). However, despite the fact that many participants felt that the majority of their interactions with professors were positive, a large number (11) of the participants reported having some troubling issues with their professors and teaching assistants. The issues ranged from minor to severe. These issues included treating them unfairly, not wanting, or being hesitant to, provide the accommodations they required, and not caring about them. Interestingly, ten out of the eleven participants that did



mention an issue with a professor had a learning challenge. Melanie, who is in her early twenties, and is a student with a learning challenge in the psychology program, noted one issue with a professor where it seemed that providing the accommodations she was entitled to was not embraced either positively or wholeheartedly:

*So . . . the only thing like, that's been kind of difficult in classes is that I sometimes use an FM system and some of my profs are a little iffy about that. . . . Because you know, it's a classroom accommodation so they actually have to do something . . . so sometimes I have profs who are kind of under the impression that they have a choice about it . . . and . . . then I kind of have to figure out how to say you know, "Actually, it's an accommodation" and . . . I have to figure out how to say, "You have to" without sounding pushy and entitled and stuff. . . . well I had a professor in my first year for an elective course and she really didn't want to use my FM system for whatever [slaps hands on table lightly] reason . . . and I kind of—she was giving me a hard time about it and then she sort of—I felt like she was acting like I was really entitled and thought that I deserved extras and stuff when I tried to explain to her why I needed it. . . . So, that was tricky. My advisor had to get involved and stuff.*

Melanie's comments about the notion of "choice" are particularly interesting. She knows that professors do not have a choice regarding accommodations for students with disabilities, and yet she feels it is her duty to find a way to explain this to them without causing additional problems. Her propensity to "internalize ableism" (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012, p. 43) is problematic. Rather than seeing the noncompliance of her professor as unlawful and unfair, she instead fears that she will be thought of as "entitled" and that she somehow "deserved extras". Clearly, the concern and worry that Melanie expressed when it came to advocating for her right to be accommodated, reveals also a troubling power dynamic. Melanie has to navigate carefully an individual and personal relationship with her professor in a way that largely ensures the status quo. She has little power and perhaps recognizes the implications if she makes her professor upset.

Moreover, the hesitation by her professor to use the FM system as a way to accommodate Melanie, reflects perhaps the resistance among people in society to adopt

strategies that veer away from the so-called *norm*. Of course, it is only within the logic of ableism that the unfortunate choice of the professor makes sense. Therefore, since "disability is not just an individual impairment but a systemically enforced pattern of exclusion" (Devlin & Pothier, 2006, p. 14), things like disregarding or having a hesitation to provide the proper tools that these students need to be successful becomes part of a larger systemic problem that continues to show these students that they are not welcome unless they fit the mold of what is considered "typical".

In addition to Melanie, Anita, who is also in her early twenties, has a learning challenge, and is double majoring in French and psychology, felt like the majority of the professors she had at the university were not willing to accommodate her disability. She discussed what was considered by her to be such an incredibly negative encounter with a professor that she had to contact the human rights office on campus:

*I found that with professors they are not willing to accommodate I've—they did not want to accommodate. They've told me that they wouldn't let me. I had to go to . . . go talk to somebody . . . about human rights. So, I'm finding with services through the school it's very good, with professors, I find they need education.*

Anita's comments clearly bring to light her recognition of how ableism is shaping her experiences, in a negative way, in her postsecondary institution. Anita recognized that many people, including professors, do not want to accommodate people differently abled because it is outside of their own personal norms to do so.

Anita also alluded to a certain binary distinction on campus between those with disabilities and those who are nondisabled. In many instances, if a person cannot function successfully within the *normal* curricula of a university classroom, then *they* are the problem rather than the system itself. She continued:

*I had to go through my . . . advisor . . . and he basically . . . handled most of it and he said that if we couldn't get it resolved we'd have to go to human, to the human*

*rights office . . . . But what we did is there was one particular professor who would not accommodate me and we made it so I was exempt from her course. . . . Which was a **mandatory** course. So now I'm exempt [light laugh]. . . . There, that was not the first incident. A lot of professors in the French department particularly, do not want any type of . . . accommodations given . . . . And I'm finding that that, that's been difficult . . . . But I'm finding that it's really good here . . . as far as services.*

Anita's comment reveals how areas of an institution, in their response to people with disabilities, can be complicated and contradictory. On the one hand, Anita described positive and productive experiences with her advisor and also the university Human Rights Office. On the other hand, she singled out the university's French department as one area of the institution that appears to be resistant to supporting people who are differently abled.

To be clear, Anita's exemption from a mandatory course because of her demands is not only a form of institutional discrimination, but also another form of exclusion. Rather than addressing the real issue, which is the education of the professor regarding disabilities, Anita was instead exempted from a required course that every student in that program needs in order to graduate. The negative effects due to this decision may become a two-fold problem: Anita's peers believe she did less than they did in order to achieve the same degree, and Anita may also view *herself* as less capable. Anita goes on to describe the negative encounter with her professor in greater detail:

*What the professor said is that . . . I will make it nowhere in life with this . . . with this disability and if I don't learn how to fix it. And what she said is I'm going to make it nowhere, I'm not even gonna pass university, she's surprised I made it this, this far. And she said something like, "if someone can't see, then that's their problem they shouldn't come to school" and because I had given the example what if you can't walk or what if you can't see, and you need glasses or you need a wheelchair, and she said that that is their problem, and she doesn't feel like she should have to accommodate. So, right then I knew that that was **totally** against the law you can't just say that to another human being.*

Power differentials often exist between professors and students. This professor made her power as a person of authority very clear to Anita. Marginalized groups in society, such as those with disabilities, may be some of the most vulnerable to outward displays of power which others may exert over them. Not only is this professor continuing to make Anita feel vulnerable, marginalized and *less than* someone without a disability, but she also exerted her considerable power to show Anita that she is not important to her and that she does not belong. However, this display was not something particularly surprising to her. She added:

*That was a [sic] interesting experience, which I've dealt with throughout my whole life so, it's not like this is the first time. . . . So I wasn't really surprised, I just expected professors to be on a different level than, let's say a grade school teacher or a high school teacher I . . . I just . . . expected more professionalism . . . which I was surprised wasn't here.*

While Anita's encounter was obviously very upsetting to her, it is not unusual for a student with an invisible disability to feel discouraged and to be "stigmatized by the education system" (Mullins & Preyde, 2013, p. 156). After all, people with disabilities are functioning within a system that values normalcy (Mullins & Preyde, 2013). This is unfortunate, as "university staff plays a crucial role in supporting students with LD both through the provision of instrumental support and through their effect on institutional climate" (Murray, Flannery, & Wren, 2008, p. 83).

Jenn, a student in her late teens with a learning challenge, is in her second year of the physics program. She discussed a specific experience with a particular professor who was resistant and reluctant to accommodate her need for lecture slides prior to coming to class:

*Umm, only the one time. . . . with the physics professor, same one. Umm, she didn't really want to be posting the . . . what are they called, the Powerpoint notes, but she **has** to. I need them. So, she's posted them for everyone in the class*

*because I needed them. . . . well, she was like—I just had to . . . I had to email her a few times because she was waiting like two, three days after the class to post the notes . . . and I'd prefer to have them before the class so I can go along with it and so . . . I just had to . . . I just, was just saying that I really **need** this. . . . I'm not going to do well in your class if I don't have access to these notes right away. So . . . she re—like reluctantly posted them.*

The professor's reluctance may be because this was a science class and the professor was not particularly familiar with the accommodations that a person with a disability needs. It could be possible that her professor did not understand why she would need to be accommodated for a language disorder in a science classroom where Jenn felt she was already successful. It could also be the case, however, that this professor *did* understand, at least to some degree, the importance of putting up the notes ahead of time, but simply did not want to make the extra effort to do so.

The politics of ableism as they are worked out within the context of postsecondary education also influenced the experiences of Michelle. Michelle, a nursing student in her mid-twenties with a learning challenge reported contradictory experiences. While Michelle made clear mention that disability services was helpful and productive in their support for her, she also found that professors were far less supportive. In fact, some professors did not provide the accommodations she is legally allowed to have. While being quick to state that many of her experiences with her professors have been positive earlier in the interview, Michelle admitted that when it came to her learning disability, they have not. She noted the relationship between herself and Disability Services as being integral for her in receiving the support she needs as well as to ensure that her professors are doing what they need to, but she has still encountered issues. She stated:

*One particular experience I can think of was a professor in the social work department . . . who signed the letter and you know, acknowledged that I had a learning disability and whatever, but we had to read a particular paper for classroom project [sic] and it was only on course reserve in the library . . . and in*

*a hard copy and I can't read hard copies. I use audiotapes, audio-books and . . . text-to-speech software. And so I said you know, "How can I go about getting a copy of this?" and I explained the situation and she said, "Well, you're probably just gonna have to drop the class" cause she just didn't wanna . . . she just didn't wanna help and she didn't care.*

This experience was certainly unfortunate for Michelle, but the experience is also a powerful reminder to researchers and educators alike, in that it shows how people in positions of authority and power may explicitly and openly discriminate against people with disabilities. Rather than attempting to step outside of her comfort zone, educate herself on students with learning challenges, and help Michelle be successful in her class, the professor instead advised her to drop out of the class.

Michelle went on to explain her decision to bring this problem to the Disability Services office. She continued:

*Yeah, she's required by law and I was like, "Well, no I need this to graduate" and I . . . tried to reason with her and tried to explain the situation and she was just kinda like, "I . . . don't care . . . like, sorry, no." And I went to Disability Services and explained the situation . . . and again, like they're a last resource kinda thing so . . . I did try to go through the appropriate channels with her myself but when she didn't want to comply, I went to them and they kinda phoned her up and they talked about it and . . . I did end up dropping the class, not because of her but because I ended up changing my major.*

Michelle's experience with this one particular professor reflects troubling trends in the research literature. Students with disabilities in postsecondary education "still comprise a subgroup that faces an array of institutional and personal barriers" (Cook, Rumrill, & Tankersley, 2009, p. 84). And it seems that in Michelle's case, her professor actively made the decision to not accommodate her.

In addition to this encounter with a professor in the social work program, Michelle mentioned another encounter with a professor who also did not want to accommodate her.

Unfortunately, this particular professor took it a step further and threatened to call law enforcement if she kept forcing the issue:

*Another course that I took was Intro to Social Policy and I used to tape record the lectures because I couldn't keep up with the typing as fast . . . and the professor just wouldn't hear of it. He . . . said, "No because we talk about . . . confidential things in the class" and, "That's not fair" and, "How do I know you're not gonna sell them?" and it was this big problem and he had threatened to call . . . the campus police to report me for academic integrity and accused me of selling these tapes. And so **again** [I] had to go through the appropriate channels and then Disability Services had to step in and say like, "Just stop. Like, whatever you're doing is wrong" and I think part of that was because these two profs—and a lot of profs at [name of university] actually are American trained and they don't have the same laws and the same reverence for people with disabilities as they do in Canada . . . So I think that might have played into it but eventually, he did agree and I did get to tape record the lectures but . . . it's just one more thing on your plate that you don't have to do . . . I don't wanna have to deal with especially when you're entering university and . . . just trying to get situated . . . It's very silly.*

This particular example from Michelle's experience is rather extreme, but the belief from some professors of the lack of "fairness" in accommodation requests is not unusual. In a study involving chronically ill women at the postsecondary level, Jung (2011) noted a remarkable outcome that the women faced: the concept of "unfair advantage" (p. 274). This "unfairness" being the belief from faculty that they are receiving an advantage that other students do not have via the accommodations they are given and, ". . . that accommodation may thwart efforts to maintain a 'level playing field' for all students; and, finally, that accommodation may lower academic standards" (p. 274).

Perhaps illustrating these findings from Jung (2011), and in addition to Michelle's experiences with accusations of unfairness, Kelly, a student in her late thirties with a learning challenge, also noted similar problems in her university experiences. For example, she mentioned an incident with the professor that occurred when she notified him that she needed to write an exam early. She stated:

*I'm in the military and I needed to push an exam **forward** instead of deferring it . . . and he was not OK with that. . . . So he made a statement and . . . I have him recorded saying that if you need to defer an exam—because he's had students in the past who, have cheated the system, and . . . they laugh about later, how they've had an extra few days to study ha ha, and he's heard about this on Twitter, wherever. Anyways, it made him cynical so he told his class, our class, that he will make the exams fifty percent more difficult because anyone who can't attend the actual exam then, I'm sorry, you're shit out of luck. . . . I didn't think that was fair cause I was[n't] . . . asking to defer it, I was asking to put it forward, giving myself less time to study, and he still said, "No, I'm sorry, I'm gonna make it more difficult." So [pause] I didn't think this was right, and I found policies where it actually says you cannot make an exam any more difficult than the rest, and I asked him, I'm like, "Can you just make it as challenging as everybody else's? I want these to be equal. Things are hard as it is", "No, sorry." So I had to go to the head of the department [coughs] and then . . . coincidentally, he [the professor] messaged me the next day saying, "I think I misunderstood him" and I was like, "You're right. I'm sorry." I mean, cause I'm not gonna—I need A's, and he has the power to control my mark so, "Yes, you're right, I must have made a—the misunderstanding", whatever.*

Kelly was plainly faced with institutional power. Knowing that she did not have an advocate in the department and that she needed to get a good grade in the course, Kelly avoided making a bigger problem for herself down the road by agreeing publicly that it must have been a misunderstanding, even though this was privately not what she truly believed. She went on to say:

*And then there was the . . . next issue where . . . I said I need to make an appointment to schedule the exam for an earlier date. He got upset because he had to get out of bed, leave his wife, and come here to bring an exam to the Disability Centre and again, I was just like, "OK, like, I don't wanna deal with you right now, but I mean, you're gonna have to do it." So he did it, but angrily. And then we had group work, and we had issues, not me personally, but my group members had issues with other group members, and we would all have to go speak to him as a group and he was not responsive at all. He was the most horrible professor I've ever had to deal with. He didn't care about the students, he was cynical, and . . . there was another policy that he just completely [pause] announced to the class that was incorrect. And I forget—I had them both in my schoolbag, and still to this day, because I want to write something bad on . . . his . . . not audit but . . . evaluate teachers . . . but I couldn't. Umm, my grades didn't match up . . . but he was the only professor that I would not even go bother with. I don't have the time to argue with him.*



Situations like this one show how entrenched and active issues of ableism are within postsecondary education. The professor is in a position of power within the university and this was something that both himself and Kelly implicitly understood. The attempts to pacify her, as well as the frustration and anger put toward her when he had to take her exam to Disability Services are continual attempts to show her who has the power and who does not. She continued:

*He was a horrible, horrible, horrible instructor. . . . He didn't care about the students . . . it was really bad. . . . It was the psychology department. . . . thank God he was only sessional. . . . oh, he told students that they weren't allowed to tape record, that was another one. Because . . . in my disabilities it's—letter of accommodations, it allows me to tape record . . . so at the beginning of his class, like, first day, he said, "Anyone who wants to record, you have to—you have to ask permission" and out of respect, even though I knew I didn't have to, I asked permission . . . just to let him know . . . And he got mad, and he said, "No", but—so I had to give him the letter. But he told the whole class this—when the whole class has the **right** and now they didn't think they did, but there was two policies I had in my hand that I had found, but I never showed him. [slight pause] So I got a really bad grade in his class . . . there was just—I tried . . . to reverse the attitudes, I tried to make him happy, but it just wasn't happening, and then next thing you know it—three weeks you're given to dispute a grade or something . . . with the military, I come back, it's too late . . . can't do anything about it. . . . GPA dropped, sucks.*

Perhaps because she is a student with a disability, her opinions and her needs are not really all that important to them in the grand scheme of things. This silent understanding of where the power differential lies may have also been the impetus for her keeping her thoughts, ideas, and findings to herself with regard to the university policies that this particular professor was actively ignoring.

Some professors exercised their power in other ways. Maria, a political science major in her early twenties with a learning challenge, was told by a professor that he gives a different exam to students who have disabilities. This issue was a new one for Maria this semester, and something that was also very troubling for her. Maria explained:

*So when I went to talk to . . . one of my professors he told me that . . . he gives students who write in Student Disability Services a different exam than the rest of the class. . . . And then I thought, OK, if that's what you do then . . . that's it, right? But . . . he was very concerned about this when he was telling me and he's like, "Just so you know, I think it's very fair" and like I had no thoughts cause . . . in my head—like, the first thing he said was, "I give students in Disability Services a different exam." So automatically, I thought I don't have a choice so I just need to roll with it, but he was sort of talking to me as if I did have a choice but at the same time his choice was better.*

Situated within the complex everyday politics of disability, the exam process a question of fairness and equity. Just because a student has a disability does not mean that she should be treated differently and should be given something other than what nondisabled students are given. This is Maria's point, expressed in the following quote:

*He was saying how . . . it's more fair because what he gives in class—because his classes are so big—what he gives in class is multiple choice and when [sic] he gives in Student Disability Services is short and long answers and he was telling me that this is . . . more fair . . . situation because in short answer and long answer you can get half marks and then you get to really express what you know and . . . the reason why he does this is because . . . he is very serious about his teaching . . . and he . . . likes to teach right up to the midterm or exam dates. So for instance, the Student Disability Services office wants him to have the exam in two or three days before. So if I write on Friday, they want the exam on Wednesday, right? And then he claims . . . if we write on Friday he might not have it until Thursday night. So . . . he's saying "Well, with the rest of the class you know, I can make a more updated . . . exam but for you since I have to give it early, I'll just do like basically what . . . we had already learned."*

Despite, perhaps the best intentions of the professor, ableist ideology as expressed through this practice is illustrated here in perhaps its finest form: if a student does not fit the status quo, they cannot compete. They are given something else that the *instructor* deems as "fair," when it may not be fair to them at all. Some students with disabilities for example, may not like tests and exams that require large amounts of written expression, so this could actually be a huge disadvantage to them compared to other students in the class.

Maria also mentioned an interesting dichotomy, one that demarcates "serious students" from others. The professor was plainly illustrating to Maria that students with disabilities are not serious students as they will not be tested on that material like the rest of the class. Interestingly though, following the discovery of the different exam by Student Disability Services and the proceeding fall-out for the professor, Maria seemed to put the blame on herself and began worrying that she would be constructed as a "problem" for simply wanting an equitable test. She continued:

*But still I said to myself, "It's OK, it's one class" and I said to myself . . . "You know maybe in the long run it'll help me because I'll have to write short answers for another class or something, whatever" but . . . I just briefly mentioned it to my advisor and then . . . she said . . . we have had problems with this prof before and this isn't fair. And then I said, "OK" that's it. But then next time I met with her, she told me that . . . they had spoken with him, like Student Disability Services . . . so her and the exam coordinator I believe . . . had spoken with him and the person above him about this issue and how . . . the students in Student Disability Services needed to write the exact same exam so, I know for a fact that he didn't really want to give me the same exam and I know that he discussed this with me recently so, I feel like he's gonna think that I strongly suggested this in Student Disability Services and them talking to him and his . . . superior were . . . like directly about me and then I made it seem OK when I was in his office hours.*

Despite knowing that the exam was inequitable, she talked herself into thinking of it as something that would be good for her "in the long run." While she briefly mentioned it to her advisor, and found out that this professor does this regularly for all students with disabilities despite being reprimanded in the past, she feared that *his* noncompliance and any trouble he would incur from this would be her fault. Maria explained:

*So, I just feel like from now on he's gonna think like, I'm a huge problem and thanks to me he got in trouble so . . . it is an issue for me because this is for my International Relations class and I just recently learned that this professor has had a very prestigious career . . . working with the government and doing research and all these things, and he's still very active . . . with the government but he decided to end his career, he would teach. So, I mean, I have **huge** respect for him and I know that . . . he sort of jokes in class that he doesn't really have respect for first years due to the failed high school systems but anyway . . . I know that . . . already I was at a disadvantage because I'm in a new program so he*

*considers me to be a first year and now I feel like I'm in another disadvantage because of this huge thing that happened . . . with the writing different exams with Student Disability Services but at the end of the day, I didn't ask them [Student Disability Services] to do that and I didn't have a problem with it.*

Much like Kelly, Maria did not want to cause additional problems by making waves.

Unlike Kelly, her reasoning for doing so was different. This was a professor who, in Maria's estimation, was deeply respected by the university community and someone whom she greatly admired. Perhaps because of this, instead of fighting for her rights as a student with a disability, she was worried and concerned that she would lose the respect of a professor that meant a lot to her and her peers. In fact, Maria feels she has lost some of it already. She added:

*I mean, it did feel like it was a little bit of a disadvantage but I accepted it, I saw it as a challenge . . . or more as like an opportunity for me to learn something out of it, but I do think he's gonna look at me differently and . . . I asked him for help with a paper—so we have a midterm coming up . . . but already I wanna do some research for a paper and . . . I couldn't make his office hours and before, when I couldn't make his office hours he'd be like, "Sure, come the next day" or whatever, right? But then this time he's like, "No, I'm really busy" . . . and then I gave him two days that I was available at **any** time and I was like, what are the chances that he's gonna be available during my class time. I . . . sort of like, took a gamble on that. But anyway, he told me that those two days he wasn't available. So, I feel like already his attitude did change and he's like, "Oh, I'm only available this time" and that was definitely not the two days that I mentioned so, I feel like . . . now he's not gonna be that willing to help me or talk to me or even give me any respect [light laughter].*

Similarly, Michapentimento, a student in her mid-twenties with a learning challenge, also mentioned an issue regarding an exam, however, her perception of the outcome was different. She noted:

*A second thing was extra time on an exam. . . . it was a philosophy thing and I knew I wasn't gonna have enough time but . . . it was for a midterm and I knew the same thing was gonna be on the final, so . . . he made an exception and he gave me double time. I get time and a half. Umm, and he said, "If you use all the time then . . . we'll see about double" or like, "We'll see about doing the same thing for the final." Uh, the thing is I didn't use all the time, cause he was worried about me . . . organizing and organizing and then running—it doesn't*

*matter if he gave me **five** hours . . . then I would organize it . . . and then . . . but he was like saying that, "It's not just you, it's all people with dis—disability. They do the same thing" sort of thing, and I'm like, "OK, well this is me." . . . I was getting kinda frustrated cause I'm like, "OK, well I know what this teacher **said**, and I'm gonna need like a bunch of time for this exam because I mean, we're writing a whole essay and this is only like a little bit and know I only have time and a half but . . . " and he gave me the time, but I ended up using less than time and a half . . . and then the final was—I needed the double time. And . . . he ended up giving it to me, which was awesome. He is . . . wonderful. . . . He really is. . . . but I'm glad he didn't say, "Well, because you didn't even use it, you know, now we're not . . . " Things change . . . you can't always predict what a professor's gonna do . . . and not put on the test so I was just trying to prepare for it, right?*

Unlike Maria, Michapentimento praises the professor for giving her the time that she needed. She does this even though he frustrated her by putting all people with a disability in the category of "doing the same thing" in regards to extra time, and using it, according to the professor's perception, in the wrong way.

Lastly, Rose, a student in her late twenties with a physical disability and the lone participant with a physical disability that mentioned an issue with a professor, noted that while the overwhelming majority of her experiences with professors has been positive, one professor would mark her down in participation marks if she was not there for classes even though that is part of her accommodations documentation. She stated:

*Uh, no. I'm, I've been really lucky. . . . if I have a problem with a class . . . like last semester I had . . . [name of professor] as one of my teachers and if I felt really bad to the point where I could not stay for her class she—I'd just go to her office hours and just tell her, "Look, I'm going home. I'm sick." Umm, and she really was fine with that, like, she didn't dock me marks for participation or anything like that. Whereas I've had another teacher where I've been having a rough go last semester and she would actually dock marks . . . for participation when I wasn't there. So it just depends on, even though it's in the accommodations, the accommodations are only a guide. They can do whatever they want at the end of the day. . . . Yeah, yeah . . . they've been great [for the most part].*

Though Rose does mention a positive example from a professor that was particularly meaningful for her, the negative experience she discusses where participation marks were

deducted clearly illustrates what Devlin and Pothier (2006) deem "citizenship/dis-citizenship" (p. 17). In this case, because Rose was not *producing* to her fullest capacity in a classroom sense, in her professor's estimation, she was not worthy of being treated like the other members of her class, since they were there and participating according to the expectations that the professor had of what good classroom citizens should be.

It is clear that for many of the women in this study, despite stating that their academic relationships with their professors were positive overall, they also encountered some major issues with some professors as well. The majority of these issues concerned not wanting to accommodate their disability or not accommodating them properly due to what the professors believed were issues of fairness and equity. It would seem that for some of these women, the degree program in which they are enrolled can make a difference in the way professors treat disability as a whole, namely that areas such as disability studies and social work are often more accepting whereas courses in the sciences are not. It is often the case though that disabilities are not recognized by faculty members until disclosure is given by the student with disabilities themselves.

#### *Disclosure to Professors*

Disclosing a disability to a professor is required at many postsecondary institutions in both Canada and the United States in order to get the accommodations and disability services that students with disabilities require (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010; Hibbs & Pothier, 2006). Unfortunately, this sometimes gives the student no other choice but to identify themselves and their disability, even if they feel uncomfortable doing so (Mullins & Preyde, 2013). For the participants in this study, the reactions to the accommodation process was mixed. When discussing the process of disclosing to their professors, just over half of the participants in this study felt that the process was relatively easy, didn't

bother them, and that they enjoyed doing it. The participants highlighted reasons for their overall satisfaction and ease with the process. These reasons included the fact that disclosing allowed them to develop a relationship with their professors and encouraged them to make conversation with them. Additionally, disclosing also became a way to differentiate themselves from others, gave them some control over the information that professor is getting about them and their disability, and gave them a feeling of empowerment.

For instance, Brooke, a student in her late teens, felt very positively about disclosing to her professors. However, for Brooke, it was because of the interest they had taken in learning about her disability. Here is Brooke discussing the accommodation process:

*I guess it could be kind of weird, but we have to give them our forms saying that we have an LD—each professor, and . . . I love that and it's not like a big experience, they're kind of a lot of little ones. . . . I love their face . . . and how they say, "Oh like . . ." like, some of them want to talk about it . . . kind of like this . . . and say "Oh, well what's this? Like, what's that?" and I love that experience of the profs . . . taking interest in it and saying, "Really?" like, and looking at me and like, "Oh, I wouldn't know", I get that all the time . . . and it's like, well, you can't see it so . . . [light laughter]. . . . But I love those . . . I haven't had one big experience that's like, this is life-changing . . . except for . . . my sister obviously but, it's the little things. Going to the profs like that . . . my friends aren't as into it but they're [professors] like, "Oh, like, like, you're here, like, this is so good" like . . . "Let's look at this." I feel like they don't get it very often . . . so . . . it's always interesting. They always like, "Yeah, like, let's talk about it" . . . and it makes me happy when I leave I'm like, "They care!", right? . . . So, that's really cool, I really like those experiences.*

In Brooke's experience, her professors have shown time and again that they care about her, and want to learn more about her and her disability in order to teach her better. This in turn, has allowed her to feel comfortable and confident in the process. By Brooke's instructors taking an interest, this was, for her, a very exciting experience.

In addition to Brooke's positive feelings about the disclosure process, Michelle felt that although disclosing to professors is irritating at first, after awhile it has allowed her to develop a positive relationship with her professors that lead to important career opportunities. She noted:

*I mean . . . it's annoying like I said, cause it's just one more thing to do especially when you're getting started with school . . . but I actually end up liking it because in these large classrooms with hundreds of students, it's a way to differentiate yourself from the prof and in situations where there's been wonderful, nice, sweet professors who are there because they want to learn—or they want to teach and they want you to learn and . . . they're just great people umm, it's a way to kinda get in with them so to speak. . . . And it gives you an excuse to go see them and go talk to them. . . . You know, a lot of profs always say like, "Oh, come to my office hours my door is always open" . . . and you don't wanna just go and be like, "Hey, please notice me." . . . but this gives me an excuse to go talk to them and . . . I can think of a few situations where I've gone in and had them sign the form and I notice like a painting on their wall or like a picture or something and you know, that's . . . sparked a conversation and one thing lead to another and I got a position being their teaching assistant and then I had a job and a reference letter and got into nursing school.*

These opportunities that were created for Michelle by the process of disclosure have clearly been very important for her during her postsecondary experiences. Not only has it made her feel "noticed," but perhaps more interestingly, *different* from the rest of the hundreds of student bodies in her classes. Unlike receiving negative attention as a student with a disability, Michelle liked the fact that she is forging relationships with professors and maintaining them based on who she is as a person. She continued:

*It's things like that that set you aside . . . which are really good. They get to know your name . . . which is great, so for reference letters and recommendations and TA positions, things like that, I've absolutely loved. Umm, and them also being more approachable . . . if you need extra help like, they see you in class because they have a name to the face and if you don't understand something you can go and say like, "I'm in class" and they say, "Yes, I know." . . . and you can kinda get help as you need it.*

It would seem that for Michelle, being known by professors not only has important applications to her life currently, but also important implications for her future. According



to Getzel and Thoma (2008), forging relationships with faculty members often is extremely important for students with disabilities in helping them remain in school. This could be because students with disabilities may feel that they, like Michelle, are distinct, important, and valued among their able-bodied peers, perhaps something that they had never felt in any of their earlier schooling experiences.

Similarly, Maria also did not like the disclosure process at the beginning, but came to see how it allowed her to establish a stronger connection with her professors and helped her to become more courageous and self-assured as a student:

*At first I wasn't really comfortable with it. . . . sometimes I would do it . . . right at the end of class sort of so that he . . . cause at the end of class the professors are in a rush, right? Cause the room needs to be there for somebody else or they have somewhere else to go so I felt like that was a good opportunity for me to sort of like, be out of sight, you know, sort of like they sign something. So, that's what I used to do at first. I was sort of . . . embarrassed about it but like I said now . . . my experience is different because it has gotten me out of my shell. I feel like now instead of going at the end of class . . . just . . . rushing to get that signature, I just like give myself some respect and some time and I sit with them and I'm like, "Well, this is what . . . what I wanna do" so . . . like I go to . . . all of my profs this semester, I visited them at least three times already so . . . that has helped me to get on a first name basis. I feel more confident and comfortable so . . . I guess now. . . . Yeah, **lately** [it's been positive] . . . but at first . . . it wasn't so much.*

Maria noted her need, in the beginning, to be invisible. These feelings are not unusual, as many students with disabilities feel that stigma often comes with the disclosure of a disability (Bernard-Brak et al., 2010; Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, & Acosta, 2005). This personal development from being awkward and uncomfortable to feeling a sense of empowerment in disclosure is especially critical, as it may help her overall postsecondary experiences be more positive and significant.

However, while the majority of study participants felt positively about the disclosure process in terms of it being easy or enjoyable, roughly 31% of the sample felt the opposite: that they had at least some difficulty with it, and they disliked it overall. All

of these were women with invisible disabilities. For the approximate third of this sample who disliked disclosure, reasons ranged from awkwardness, feelings of shame and embarrassment, difficulty in keeping confidentiality, the fear of judgement by others, and feelings of nervousness and anxiety. Kelly stated:

*That [bringing the letter to professors] sucks. . . . It's **not** positive in my eyes . . . because you have to [light chuckle] get up in front of the whole class, really, or whoever's there, usually is full, and hand it to the teacher. And they know what you're handing them and—well, I think in my world they do. Umm, I'd rather not anyone know, and on top of it, the money that they gave you for getting tested is considered a bursary and then you give it to work, and then they find out cause they can't hide it, you can't disclose it—or keep it disclosed, and I asked Financial Aid, I'm like, "This shouldn't be here. . . .", cause that was money to get tested, it's not a bursary, it's not gonna help with tuition . . . and I have to give this to my work and I don't want them to know that I have a learning disability cause the military is far behind society . . . with understanding and everything so . . . it's been kind of a struggle. . . . But not too bad . . . I'm sure people have it worse.*

Kelly was clearly very aware of the stigma that is associated with disability. Perhaps most importantly, however, Kelly drew attention to issues of institutional power and ableism in her comments. The money for her disability testing was considered a bursary, when it is not a bursary at all. Since Kelly must disclose all scholarships and bursaries to her work, she was now forcibly disclosing her disability to her place of work as well, which is something she desperately did not want to do. When she brought this to the university's attention, however, the situation was not corrected immediately. In fact, Kelly continued to struggle even at the time of our interview to get the bursary status removed. She continued to say:

*I hate it. I hate people—I'm afraid—I worry a lot about people's judgments . . . and I'd rather play as if we were all equal so . . . I'd rather . . . No, no [I don't feel like I'm equal]. People get it, and I don't know how, I don't understand.*

Kelly showed her deep understanding of where persons with disabilities fall on the hierarchy of society. In her opinion, they fall far below people in society who do not have

disabilities. Also though, her comments reflect her own belief that *she* is somehow "less" than others. It is her personal understanding that everyone else seems to "get it" but she does not.

Similarly, much like Kelly, Natalie, a student in her mid-twenties with a learning challenge in the combined program of social work and disability studies also expressed feelings of shame and embarrassment upon disclosure. She added:

*When you disclose a disability, when you say you need like, a note-taker or anything like that it almost feels as if you're nude . . . and you're really coming and saying like, "I'm . . . ashamed and I'm embarrassed, but I need someone to take notes for me. I know that sounds ridiculous." Like, it almost feels like you need to **explain** it . . . and it feels like you need to do that because the note's not enough. . . . It's . . . too impersonal. . . . I wouldn't even mind if I could actually have an avenue to speak to professors [light laughter] but I feel like they wouldn't listen to me because I'm a student.*

In addition, Joy, a student in her early twenties with a learning challenge majoring in social work, mentions that her personal self-confidence makes the disclosure process easy for her. She also noted though, how the process can shine a spotlight onto students with disabilities. She noted:

*Giving them the letter . . . I guess it doesn't bother me . . . that goes back to more of a family thing like we're very empowered that we have disabilities but like, you know there's only ten percent of us at university with learning disabilities so we feel like we've conquered something . . . so to me, it doesn't really faze me. . . . obviously, my mom has a learning disability but she's done great. . . . I have a very supportive boyfriend who just reads me everything if I don't know . . . so for me, it's not a big deal . . . it's just . . . you just don't want the **world** to know . . . if you're not willing to share it. . . . everyone knows when you're handing in the letter that you're part of Disability Services . . . like . . . people . . . pick up on it. . . . it's kind of embarrassing. . . . you just like, you're prof is kinda like flustered that you've just handed them this letter and found out that then that they have to sign something and then you have to keep the signature paper . . . and then sometimes profs ask you questions and now you're like, "OK great, now I get to tell everyone that I get a computer." . . . And then I don't do my . . . tests with everyone else so . . . that's kind of a challenge.*

Many students like Kelly, Natalie, and Joy, feel a sense of dread about disclosing, which is why they often choose not to disclose their disabilities to others (Olney & Brockelman, 2005). This, according to the Olney and Brockelman, is because "some individuals believe there is a 'cost' in being identified as a person with a disability" (2005, p. 81), and unfortunately, the price of revealing personal and confidential information about themselves, such as the fact that they have a disability, often made things very uncomfortable for them.

Perhaps, in an effort to eliminate these feelings, a few participants mentioned that they felt that the process as a whole would be much better if the student themselves were not the ones to disclose their personal information with the professor directly. Anna, a student in her early twenties with a learning challenge in the combined social work and disability studies program, stated:

*Sometimes I think it would be nice if we could do it via email. . . . One, because I think it kills trees to do it in a paper form . . . and two, because if you're doing it at the beginning or end of classes before you've really figured out when your timeslot fits with the professor's office hours, then you're kinda in with everybody else and it's harder to keep confidentiality . . . which the professors really wanna protect, and it's like, "Well, yeah, thanks for the paper, can't talk to you about it right now." [light laughter]*

The desire to not go into detail with others about their disability may be a way to protect themselves from the judgment and stigma that can happen upon disclosure (Bernard-Brak et al., 2010; Dowrick et al., 2005), in addition to not wanting to feel different or outside of the norm. Moreover, perhaps removing themselves from the disclosure process altogether may also be a way to remove themselves from this unwanted attention, which can often result in stereotypes and labels from those that are determining, in the end, their final grade. It could also be the case that having others disseminate this information may

protect them from encountering a possible change in professor attitude following the disclosure of their disability.

Interestingly, regarding changes in professor attitude and the disclosure process, nine of the study participants felt that there was a change to professors' and peers' attitudes after they disclosed to them. These changes ranged from professors and peers being much nicer to them, lowering their expectations of them, giving them more attention than they did previously, and two participants noted receiving more negative responses than before. Anne, who is an international student from China, is in her late teens, and also has a visual impairment, felt that once people know she has a physical disability, they treat her more favourably. She noted:

*I would say they just get more nice to me and that's it. . . . Yeah, they kind of realize I need help sometimes. . . . And would be pretty understanding and pretty nice, pretty helpful.*

In addition, other participants in the study, like Maria and Brooke, felt that disclosing a disability to others often meant that they would give them more attention and extra help.

Maria stated:

*OK so . . . well one of my favourite professors this term . . . I sort of think that, I don't know why, maybe . . . it could be because of these accommodations or it could be maybe because she just . . . likes my personality or something I don't know, but I feel like she does give me more attention than the other students. So, I don't really know why that is . . . but it could very well be because I participate and I visit her office hours, you know? It could be because of that but at the same time, I sort of don't know if I earned that . . . treatment or respect or if she just granted me it because she thinks like, "Oh, you need **extra** help" . . . . I really don't know.*

Similarly, Brooke added:

*Yes . . . definitely. . . . I think it can either sway someone to pay more attention to you or less attention to you and I think once I tell someone it becomes really clear . . . whether they're paying more attention to me or less—I guess, teachers. . . . and I find even socially, not that people talk slower to me that aren't my—that like—mm, I just find my friends sometimes talk to me and then when we talk about*

*academic stuff and I'm talking and they're like, "Oh, like, do you need extra time?" and they're . . . trying to be nice . . . but it's like, I can tell myself . . . when I . . . don't need you to ask me when I need to do things differently . . . I understand it and I don't get mad, but I think that you see . . . with professors smile at me more in class . . . or like, you know, like, is everyone— when they ask does everyone understand?*

Notably, both Maria and Brooke seem to attach perceptions of intelligence to this notion of "extra-attention". Further, they both share the feeling, post-disclosure, that their professors believed that they *need* the extra attention because they have a learning challenge. Brooke continued:

*They [professors] look me in the face and like, it's kinda like, it's nice, but it's like, mm hmm, look at that person too, like [laughter], don't just look at me like, I get it. Cause my classes can be small sometimes . . . like, "Oh, does everyone understand?" and I'm sittin' in the front always . . . and I'm just like, "Yeah, I get it!" [laughter, sarcastic tone]. . . . So, I'm like, "OK, like, we can go on" . . . So, it's good that they give me a little bit of like, "Do you get it honey?" and I'm like, "Mmm, yeah I get it". . . [laughter] . . . so, it's OK. Like . . . looking at me—I don't think anyone's like, "Oh, that girl must have an LD they're looking at her" but . . . it's kinda like, "Oh, OK, I get it" [laughter].*

This perception may be because many people with invisible disabilities are often viewed by others as capable and nondisabled (Olney & Brockelman, 2005). Therefore, once the invisible disability has been revealed to others, the perceptions toward the person with the learning challenge may change, which may all of a sudden project the image that they are now less capable of doing challenging academic work (Olney & Brockelman, 2005).

In fact, other study participants with a learning challenge shared the fear of being labeled as "not smart" and that others lowered their expectations of them upon disclosure.

Michelle stated:

*Umm, hmm, not so much [disclosure doesn't change how they react or engage with me] with close friends. They're usually just like, "Wow, really?" and you know, you have that . . . conversation . . . and then they sort of move on. . . . but I think for people who I'm not as close with or people I don't know, I think it does a little bit . . . . just their appreciation for what I know . . . and their . . . confidence in my knowledge and skills, I think. . . . I think [it changes] in like a*

*negative way. . . . I don't know if they would necessarily see me as somebody as credible as they thought I was if they're, you know, actively seeking help or they have this opinion of me as being somebody who's, you know, a strong participant in class or a strong leader in clinical and then they come to learn this information and then all of a sudden they're like, "Is she making this mistake because she has a learning disability?" . . . Or like, "She's struggling to do her math test because she has a learning disability. Oh, she's just doing this because of this" . . . and it just creates excuses I think.*

Similarly, Melanie noted:

*Occasionally. . . . Most of the time, like vast majority of the time, no . . . but I do think sometimes there is a bit of like, people are surprised when I get a really good grade or [slight pause] I think maybe there's that difference between the physical disability and learning disability thing . . . that maybe there is more of a tendency for people to see students with learning disabilities as not as smart somehow, or as like . . . you're getting all these accommodations so that you can do well even though you're not as smart. . . . There's the whole not as smart thing . . . that happens.*

For students with learning challenges, there can be a desire to "hide their disability in an attempt to limit public perceptions" (Mullins & Preyde, 2013, p. 155). For Michelle, much like Maria and Brooke, the disclosure of her learning challenge may make her less "credible" to others, as they have come to expect a certain level of intelligence from her that often garnishes respect from others. In her opinion, if her learning challenge was discovered by others this respect may not be there any longer. Perhaps as a reaction to the issues faced by some of these women with the disclosure process, participants in this study also discussed the importance of awareness training and education for university staff.

#### *Awareness Training and Education*

Women in the study consistently reported and recommended that more awareness training and education is needed for professors regarding issues faced by differently abled students. Nine of the participants in this study (56% of the sample) noted that they

believed education and awareness about disabilities was especially important, as many professors do not understand what students with disabilities require, how to teach them, or have no understanding of what some types of disabilities are or how to accommodate them appropriately. Natalie for example, stated:

*I don't know if this is . . . mandatory or not, but I think all professors should be well versed on some of the disabilities that their students are experiencing . . . in order for them to be able to provide an educational experience that's equal. . . . Or, equitable. . . . so I wish, I don't know if that's there, but if they've had . . . some training and maybe **meaningful** training . . . not like, doing like, an online course . . . but maybe more interactive. . . . and maybe something that . . . everyone knows someone with a disability. I don't care what people say they all know it's an elephant in the room . . . especially with an invisible disability. . . . and it may make people uncomfortable, but if there was a way that they could all say like—feel comfortable enough to maybe share their own experiences or, “Hey, like actually my daughter has ADD.” . . . if there was an environment where they felt comfortable enough to maybe . . . make it so it can be acknowledged as a real thing.*

Interestingly, Natalie's comments reflect similar research on the experiences of students with invisible disabilities at another Canadian university. Mullins and Preyde (2013) found that this "general lack of understanding" from professors was amplified when the disability was invisible (p. 153). It seems that in Natalie's experience, she felt that her educational experience was not equitable to an able-bodied student as her professors required more knowledge in order to give her the equity that she required. In her opinion, without giving the professors the training to really understand invisible disabilities, they simply fail to recognize and take into serious consideration the way disabilities shape student learning. Professors, then, are doing students with invisible disabilities a huge disservice if effective and productive teaching for all students is one of their primary goals. She continued:

*And not, the students—it's almost like the way they structure it, . . . [clicking desk], or at least this is from my experience is that . . . the students need to take such a proactive role in an area that they may not feel comfortable in and they*



*may need a little more outreach, a little more . . . guidance and help. . . And, it's not there. So, I think that it's difficult to say the policy should be a change in culture, but I think that policy changes can do it, but there's already things that legitimize someone from needing a notetaker but it—I feel as if it's maybe not taken very seriously and . . . the policy is there . . . the protection is there. Umm, but I do feel as if part of it is a . . . cultural shift. . . . Could be the social worker in me though [light laughter].*

Rather than the accountability to learn more about invisible disabilities being placed on the professors or the administration in general, it is placed instead, back on the student with the disability. Therefore, it is the student's role to educate without additional help or support from anyone. Natalie's comments certainly reflect her understanding of disability as a social construction as well as how ableism is created and maintained within society. While the policies are procedures that are technically there for students with disabilities, if they are not being used or monitored effectively, they are rendered useless. Moreover, in Natalie's opinion, this insufficient knowledge has once again structured her as an outsider— showing her who and what deserves value and what does not (Devlin & Pothier, 2006).

Anita also felt similarly to Natalie in that educators need much more knowledge about disabilities in general. She noted:

*Well the last time I spoke with him [the president of the university] he basically said that I was telling him that there needs to be education for these professors and he said that they do go through education. . . . no [he didn't mention what they do] he just said that they go through a program, but I was like the best thing they can do for students is educate professors because they're the ones in the end that have to give you these accommodations. So I would say education for professors **mandatory**. You shouldn't be able to become a professor if you don't know learning disabilities because you're in the field of teaching people.*

Like Anita, a study conducted by Garrison-Wade (2012) found that, "several students identified instructors' ignorance, lack of training, refusal to accept differences, and prejudices as impeding their success" (p. 118). This is unfortunate, as professors have,

arguably, one of the greatest impacts on student experiences and success in their classes.

Furthermore, for students with learning challenges, this lack of education may lead to perceptions of them that are inaccurate. Melanie, for example, noted that it should be important to educate professors about the fact that learning challenges do not equal lower intelligence:

*Maybe just give them [professors] some kind of brief overview of disabilities and I think it would be important to explain that a learning disability isn't like, a lower IQ . . . that they're specific cognitive difficulties . . . cause I think not all profs know that . . . and they assume that you won't do as well or that you don't have the ability to do as well . . . so you should get like, a seventy and not . . . an eighty-five or whatever. . . . I think if they just could have some kind of general information packet or something . . . for profs . . . I think that would be good.*

For Anna, professors being uneducated about the disabilities that are present within their own classrooms is something she felt they would like to change:

*I find a lot of them **wish** they had more. Like . . . when I go to talk to them about my specific needs they say, "I wish I knew more." . . . [The university should] maybe offer like, online modes or something so that they don't have to try to get everybody there at the same time, which would cost a lot of money. . . . So they could have like, an online class on this disability, or this one, or more collectively, on accommodating students with disabilities in the classroom, cause it doesn't really matter whether you have Down Syndrome or Cerebral Palsy that also umm, impacted your brain, either way you're still gonna need the same sort of . . . what am I looking for? Umm, accommodations.*

Perhaps in solidarity with Anna's belief that people and professors really do want to be educated in disabilities, it seems that, at least for some of the women in this study, the judgmental comments they received from others was recognized as simply a lack of understanding rather than that person being mean or cruel in any way. Therefore, rather than blame the person for the things they are saying, some women felt it was not meant to be malicious toward them. Anne for example, said "I think one thing we could do is raising awareness. Sometimes people just don't know, it's not because they don't want [to]." Further, Anita stated:

*Yes [that was still difficult for people to accommodate]. A lot of professors were saying that they felt like that was an unfair advantage because I should learn how, how to spell. Despite the fact that I tried to explain to them I cannot learn it, that's why I have a disability. . . . But, they don't seem to understand that. So I feel like it's not, I don't think they're being particularly **mean** I think they just need some type of education or they just need to learn...about what a disability is . . . because they . . . have told me more than once that . . . I should be studying harder and I should be learning how to spell. They don't really understand that I **can't**.*

Similarly, Anita then shared her feelings about the disbelief she gets from professors when she tells them she has a learning challenge. However, she was quick to note that the reason they make comments about her learning disability was that they simply do not have any knowledge about her disability or learning challenges in general, so they just do not understand where she is coming from. She added:

*Oh . . . they definitely don't believe me. They feel like . . . not being able to spell isn't any type of disability, it just means I haven't learnt . . . and they want me to learn how to spell and they feel like it's my responsibility to learn what I don't know. . . . Despite the fact that I have tried to learn and I have been in different programs and my whole life I've been struggling with it. It's not like I didn't try to learn so I feel like . . . they definitely don't believe that my disability is a disability. . . . I think [they don't believe me] because they just don't know what a learning disability is. . . . I don't think they're doing it out of you know, cruelty, or that they think I'm lying. I think they just do not understand **at all**.*

The lack of knowledge and understanding demonstrated by the university professors mentioned above points in some way to an ethical issue that is really raised in discussions about people marginalized in society. And by this I mean, one could easily argue that adults in general, university professors in particular, have an *ethical obligation* to deepen their knowledge of people who are differently abled and how to include them in a meaningful and respectful way in the university classrooms. To put it a little differently, they do not have a right not to know.

In addition to Anna, Adelaide, a student in her early twenties with a learning challenge majoring in biochemistry, stated that while she felt that all of her professors this semester have been understanding and accommodating, she still felt that many professors were lacking in the knowledge to teach a student with a disability properly:

*For the three classes that I'm taking this semester, yes [the professors do understand my disability and how best to accommodate me]. . . . And this might be judgmental, but from my interactions with previous professors, I wouldn't say that all profs would know how to deal with something like that. . . . To be honest . . . I don't think it is a lack of education on the topic, I think it's just a matter of the person . . . themselves. A little bit maybe . . . arrogant. Umm, dismissive of something like that. . . . Like, "Oh, come on. Get over it." . . . And then in other cases it would probably just be . . . maybe like a cultural, language difficulty. But other than that like, I would hope that you know, people with higher education are able to deal with something like someone with a [light laughter] learning disability.*

However, unlike the other participants, she did not feel that the blame should solely be placed on a lack of education, but rather, a variety of different factors such as egotism or cultural differences.

Further, differences in culture as well as a clear way to implement training programs for professors were noted as a potential reasons why there is a lack of knowledge and awareness about disabilities and accommodations. Two participants for example, Michapentimento and Michelle, thought that while more training is always beneficial, they were not sure how to best implement it for a postsecondary setting. Michelle added that while additional awareness and training is always beneficial for everyone involved, it is generally professors that have not been educated in Canada who are lacking the most in terms of understanding disabilities. She stated:

*I think they could . . . you can always benefit from more training. Umm, they don't necessarily have to really think about what they need to do . . . because the actions are already there . . . and the students and Disability Services sort of implement them. Umm, and at least in my situation it's as simple as sending an email . . . to give my exam. . . . So I don't think they necessarily have to have*

*training in terms of like how to engage someone with a learning disability or in the classroom kind of thing . . . just because I don't think university's designed to do that. . . . I think there should be an emphasis placed on professors coming from outside of Canada who don't have that same respect for disabilities, absolutely, because you know, it's not as recognized in other places . . . or it's not as embedded in the law. . . . yeah I don't also know what sort of training they go through . . . so I can't really say but I . . . imagine they have to do some sort of . . . like AODA [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act] training or whatever.*

While Michapentimento agreed that more training for professors would be a good thing, she expressed the notion that professors could not be made to attend these sessions and, even if they did, she was unsure how this would help their teaching:

*That [education for professors] would be neat. . . . I think professors almost need to opt in to that sort of thing though, like . . . cause . . . you can't force a professor like . . . go to this thing on this thing . . . you know? . . . cause we could tell them about it if we wanted to, right? . . . I don't know. Would it make a difference in how they teach? I don't know. . . . what could they do differently than they're already doing, you know? . . . I'm just thinking like, what would be different than the same old Powerpoint . . . or movie . . . or how would learning be different? . . . And testing? Because it's the same testing . . . that you're gonna get: multiple choice, essay format.*

In many ways here, Michapentimento placed professors on a pedestal of sorts. She seemed to participate in the structuring of professors as *powerful* and students (particularly those with disabilities) as *powerless*. Rather than see education for professors regarding students with disabilities as mandatory and critically important, she instead felt that it really needs to be the professor's choice. In addition, she was unsure as to whether it would really have any direct impact on their teaching. Therefore, if students with disabilities cannot thrive within the borders of what is already given to them, they are simply pushed out. Perhaps in response to these attitudes, discussions centered around postsecondary success also became an important theme to emerge from the data.

*Success: Definitions, Beliefs, and Contributors*

What it means to be truly successful in postsecondary education may be different for every student. In fact, whether a student is academically successful or not may have something to do with their own personal views and beliefs about themselves. Hsieh, Sullivan and Guerra, (2007), noted that if people believe they are capable of achieving success and they are focused on their own self-improvement (what the authors refer to as having "self-efficacy" as well as "mastery goals") (p. 468), they were more successful academically than those who did not. In addition, a student whose low grades have deemed them as being "less successful" than others embraced objectives that harmed them in the long run (p. 470). This is somewhat worrisome, as a large majority of the women in this study (roughly 69%), listed good grades as being a major definition of success for them personally.

Michapentimento admitted that grades are really the only factor to defining academic success. She noted:

*Honestly, good grades. . . . So, I think trying your best doesn't mean anything if you're not getting a good grade. I mean, you can try your best and get an F and you're still failing . . . so it doesn't mean anything if you're gonna get kicked out of university and you're still trying your best. . . . Sorry for all you try-hards out there . . . but I mean, your mom could tell you, "Oh, you tried your best", but you're still failing so you need to do something different.*

Similarly, Joy felt that academic success was really only defined by grades. She stated:

*Success is over a B plus . . . . well . . . when you're looking at . . . success academically [light laughter] . . . for me, it comes in the form of grades, like that's how I would look at it. . . . Other people take it as a different way but when I think of like, if I've done well, my average is above a B . . . right? My last two years has—above an A so, I would say I'm doing well.*

From the very beginning of their schooling experiences "female students are made exemplars of appropriate academic and social behavior" (Sadker et al., 2009, p. 196).

Getting good grades, and being "dependable female citizens" may have perhaps influenced how many of the female participants in this study define academic success (p. 196).

Other participants also indicated understanding the material and enjoying what they are learning was a critical factor. Melanie for instance, stated:

*Mostly it means that—[slight pause] I think I really understand the things that I'm learning . . . a lot better than I did in grade school and high school because then I kind of—I'm really good at memorizing a bunch of stuff really fast and that was kind of what I did until university . . . but now I feel like, I care a lot more about actually understanding what I'm learning . . . so, I do that more and it's more difficult, but it's kinda more rewarding too . . . cause I really, really like my major and I think that's kinda my main definition of success is . . . actually **getting** what I'm learning. . . . Plus, I also get good grades. . . . Yeah . . . kind of both.*

Similarly, Jenn also shared a similar definition:

*I feel I'm successful when . . . I feel that I understand the material and I feel that I'm doing my best on all of my exams and stuff. Uh, all of my marks have been like in the 80s and 90s . . . so, I definitely feel that that's a success, it's all A's.*

It can certainly be assumed that perhaps the more a student feels they understand the material, the more comfortable and confident they become in themselves within that particular class or classroom leading to the possibility of greater academic success within that class as well. For Melanie and Jenn, it would seem that the greater the understanding, the greater the personal reward, in extrinsic ways like grades, but often this reward becomes an intrinsic one as they feel they are more capable moving forward in their degree.

Interestingly, however, for Michelle, while high marks were an important aspect of achieving academic success, having high expectations of herself was also especially important. She stated:

*Well . . . I tend to set the bar very high for myself and I expect a lot . . . out of myself, whether that's just personal values or you know, I feel like I have something to prove . . . I don't really know but . . . I get outstanding marks and you know, I've been able to keep that average and those . . . the average that I've set for myself and . . . I'm constantly going up from there.*

It is possible that the invisible nature of her disability made Michelle feel like she had more to prove than other nondisabled students on campus. Olney and Brockelman (2005) found that the perceptions of students with invisible disabilities were that other people saw them as not having a disability. Therefore, Michelle may have felt that she needed to keep up appearances in order to not only "fit in" with her peers, but excel in order to prove not only that she is just as capable, but that she truly belongs within the elite environment of postsecondary education.

Lastly, a few other items as well, such as having good relationships with professors and peers, knowing what they were aiming for, doing the best of their ability, being involved on campus, and learning as much as possible while here, were also mentioned by a few of the participants. Adelaide for example, also had similar sentiments that grades were important to her definition of success, but also felt that building relationships with peers and professors, achieving academic milestones, and enjoying the learning portion of school also defined academic success for her personally. She stated:

*Success to me is mostly straight As [taps fingers on desk] . . . working in a lab with a professor, completing a thesis, and just enjoying the academic part of school. . . . Having . . . a good relationship with my . . . professors . . . peers who also kind of have that same standard [taps fingers on desk] . . . but I was very isolated from those types of people . . . because I felt like I . . . couldn't connect in any way just cause my grades were low—and I was ashamed . . . of that and I thought I was being stupid so I'm like . . . "I don't deserve to be with people like that."*



Interestingly, however, Adelaide noted that because of her achieving below her standard of what she would consider success, she felt she did not deserve to be with people who she considers successful.

Moreover, Maria shared similar feelings. She felt that being both known and respected by peers and professors and being involved in various activities around campus became a critical part of her definition of success. She added:

*OK so being successful in school to me . . . in an undergraduate degree would be . . . being known by your professors, being respected by your peers . . . it would be being involved . . . on campus or in the community. Something that shows that . . . you care more than just about yourself. Umm, and also academically, I don't necessarily mean like an A plus but maybe a B average. Umm, I would say that's success. . . . And, yeah just . . . I mean for instance being respected by your peers . . . this semester . . . my biggest goal was to . . . get known by my professors and sort of like to start building relationships with them but I . . . sort of switched it and now my . . . biggest goal this term is to . . . participate in class. And actually, that completely helps my first goal anyway.*

For Maria, the feeling of being successful is almost reflected in other people. If she earned their respect, if she gives of herself to "the greater good", if she participated and others noticed her hard work and perseverance, she felt that she had achieved some level of success. She added:

*It [participation] has helped me be an active learner . . . it has helped me be on a first name basis with my professors, and I have actually been approached by other classmates for help and actually they probably know more than me. So, respect for my peers in that sense is [a] huge . . . sense of pride to me . . .*

Rather than success being an intrinsic thing that she gives and achieves for herself, it is instead earned when Maria sees her caring, compassionate nature noticed by others. One of the ways in which this has actively played out for her in her classes was when she decided that she needed to participate more in class. This participation got her noticed in positive ways by professors and peers in her classes, which made her feel good about herself. She continued:

*For instance . . . yesterday . . . one of my class has mentors, so aside from the GAs we have mentors, and the mentors put together . . . a study group and we did Jeopardy. So we did it in groups and in my group . . . in the middle of the game I just asked everybody their names and introduced myself cause I've seen them in the class but I don't know their names . . . and when it was my turn to say my name, the one girl in my group was like, "Oh yeah, you're the only girl that the professor knows the name of" and then I thought in my head, I thought, "That's so not true [laughter], she knows other people's names . . . I hear her say it in class" but it . . . I would agree that in that class I do participate a lot . . . so when I put up my hand like, she says my name directly and I mean, I think . . . "Yeah, I did good" . . . you know? [laughter] . . . So, I would consider that to be success too.*

In Maria's eyes, she must be doing something right in the class to be remembered by the professor. This is possibly even more important to her because other people in the class who do not have disabilities are obviously noticing this as well, which made Maria feel like she is successful in some way.

Further, Rose stated that doing things to the best of her ability and achieving her final goal of getting into a Faculty of Education program is a key aspect to her definition of success:

*Well, getting into teacher's college would be a good one [light laughter]. That's—and honestly, I've done everything to the best of my ability. If, you know, my teachers don't recognize that, OK fine. It is what it is. But, as long as at the end of the day I'm able to get where I want to go into teacher's college that is how I monitor success.*

It would seem that while the large majority of the study participants are motivated externally by arbitrary things like grades, some women are motivated on an internal basis to do the best they can, really understand the material, gain the respect of others, and creating good relationships with peers and professors. This is encouraging, as self-worth and success cannot always be measured in the form of grades given based on someone else's definition of "mastery".

Since external achievements in the form of grades defined success in postsecondary education for the majority of participants, it was interesting to discover that when asked whether or not they felt they were successful in school, ten participants (roughly 63% of the study population) believed they were. Jenn noted, "*definitely* I have [been successful academically here]. . . Absolutely." Perhaps this wholehearted belief that they have been successful in their academic careers may be because of the many obstacles they have already faced in their lives just *getting* to university and therefore, once these women were accepted into an elite academic institution, they understood in an even bigger way, the need to be successful in order to show others that they deserve to be there. This understanding and recognition of an opportunity afforded to them that is not always given to those with disabilities, perhaps propelled them to do whatever it took to be successful in their programs.

However, despite the large number of participants that did feel they were successful in school, six of them (roughly 38%) said that they did not believe they had been successful in university thus far. When put against their own personal definitions of success, often coming in the way of grades, these participants did not feel they had achieved what they consider to be success in academia. Amélie, a student in her mid-twenties, noted:

*No [I have not been successful academically] . . . I don't know, like, in the [name of university]. . . it's a good school, you know? But when it comes to academics, no I . . . I don't think that I've been successful. . . . Because . . . my GPA does not transcribe with all my knowledge that I know. . . . It doesn't match so I don't think it's successful. I think I'm just mediocre.*

Similarly, Marie a student in her early twenties with a learning challenge in the movement science program, commented:

*I would say no. Not as successful as I would have hoped or I thought I would be. . . . In high school I had very, very high marks. . . . And . . . I was also playing sports. . . . So without that, is a **big** change. Umm, so coming here my marks are **much** lower and I'm much more anxious going into every single exam. . . . maybe [I feel like I'm not as successful here as I was in high school] cause . . . I feel like there's more pressure, here. Uh, and there's a lot less evaluations . . . that go towards your final mark . . . here . . . than it was in high school. . . . And . . . there's a lot . . . more stuff that I have to know . . . here, and . . . yeah.*

Interestingly, it would seem that for Amélie and Marie, their self-worth as students is determined by the grades they received in the classroom. Both Amélie and Marie equated their achievements in the classroom to themselves as people. Amélie described herself as "mediocre" whereas Marie compared her secondary school experiences of high grades in the classroom and success in athletics to a much lower performance outcome in university, leading to a surge in anxiety and pressure that she did not experience before. This "pressure" that Marie described above may also be a result of her placing her self-worth as a student against someone else's definition of "successful," namely her professors. Perhaps in this case, both women felt less successful and more pressure because their *professors*, clearly people they respect on campus, defined a successful student as one who performed well by scoring a high grade.

Further, while the previous women felt they were not successful because they lacked the grades, Kelly, felt she was not successful because she did not compare with others her age:

*[pause] [breathes out][I feel like I haven't been successful because] It's taking me forever. And it's hard watching eighteen-year-olds excel like, rocket through this. . . . And so I feel like I am way behind schedule. Like, they're gonna graduate with Honours, they're going to go on to grad school, PhD, and be able to graduate, start a family, buy a house, do all that fun stuff by the time they're, I don't know, twenty-eight. . . . So I mean, that's pretty awesome. . . . And I would consider that successful.*

Implicit in her comparison, is the fact that she conveys, quite clearly, her knowledge and status as *other*. She compared herself to others who are non-disabled, placing them in the center of what she would consider an ideal life; a life that is created and achieved, in her opinion, by their success in postsecondary school. This heightened knowledge and awareness may be because, according to Goodley (2013), "a key site of the oppression of disabled people pertains to those moments when they are judged to fail to match up to the ideal individual" (p. 639) and, therefore, "ableist processes create a corporeal standard, which presumes ablebodiedness, inaugurates the norm and purifies the ableist ideal" (p. 640). In short, Kelly's comparison of herself to others on campus feeds into the social construction of disability: that it is somehow less than, lack, or, a deficiency of some kind. In her mind, this construction of "the ideal student" is one who finishes school quickly while being highly successful, gets a good job, buys a home, and enjoys social luxuries, all before they reach thirty years old. Therefore, in her opinion, if she could just be like them, her own personal struggles would no longer exist.

During the discussions regarding school success, major contributors to this success were described by the ten women who believed that they were successful in school. Fifty percent of these women felt that major contributors included dedication, hard work, and internal drive and determination. Anita said:

*I think it's just dedication, making sure that I'm keeping up with all my work, all my readings, getting clarification if I don't understand anything. . . . Just hard, just hard work [light laughter].*

Similarly, Melanie believed her own personal work ethic was a major factor in her academic success. She added:

*One is probably my work ethic cause I'm a pretty hard worker. . . . And also, I . . . I think I'm smart [light laughter] and you know, in some areas . . . more than others . . . but overall, I think I'm reasonably intelligent . . . and I think liking*

*what I'm learning helps a lot . . . cause I work a lot harder at it and I care about it. . . . And then I have pretty good support too.*

Joy also felt that having the intrinsic motivation to work hard was of key importance to her success in school. For her, the motivation to prove to others that she belongs in an academic environment continually fuels her to succeed. She stated:

*I would say . . . drive and determination. . . . There's . . . when you **are** a marginalized population you do feel . . . a chance of resistance and overcoming . . . which is a great motivator. . . . school-wise what contribute to it . . . honestly it just comes down basically to the grants, to getting the money to get things. . . . I would say mostly it's the technology, being access to technology . . . being in an environment where they allow you to access your technology.*

In addition to this internal drive for success, a couple of the women also felt that understanding *how* school works and learning the system is also important. Michelle for instance, noted:

*I would say having a good work ethic. Umm, having the knowledge of how I learn and what my disability entails is probably the most important because I have to tailor everything I do around that. . . . so if I know that I can't read by conventional means I have to go do something in order to fix that . . . and having that knowledge just makes it a lot easier. Knowing how to do school [makes quotation sign with fingers], and I say that in quotes, because it's not just simply like, retaining the information and writing a test it's you know, engaging in your learning, getting help when you need it . . . like, taking your time, not leaving things 'til the last minute, things like that. Umm, being involved in your learning . . . and I think having that knowledge of having a disability and having that awareness of having to always be on and advocating for myself really contributed to that. . . . does that make sense? . . . It's like a developed self-awareness . . . I guess?*

Many women in this study certainly attributed much of their success in postsecondary to something *within themselves*, whether that be skills that they themselves have developed over time including learning how the system works, or some kind of internal desire or motivation to succeed, via hard work and/or dedication to their studies. Perhaps because these women have had to fight their way through a system that often marginalizes them for having a disability, they recognize the need to develop these skills in order to not only

succeed, but break away from the constructions of disability within a rigid, normative framework of success created by postsecondary institutions.

Lastly, another 30% of the women who deemed themselves successful noted that having good support and good support systems in place was critical to their overall success. Michapentimento believed that it was both her ability to put forth hard work into her studies as well as having proper support systems in place that helped her to be successful in her academic career. She noted:

*I'm very happy to be here and . . . I definitely—I work hard at the things I— I do. Umm, and I do have a lot of support being here. Umm, my mom and my dad when . . . if he was around . . . and . . . I have a very awesome . . . partner in life so definitely him. Uh, so support systems and . . . definitely support systems and . . . working hard.*

Further, for Rose as well, feeling supported academically has, in her opinion, allowed her to achieve a certain level of success in her studies. She stated:

*Again, having [name of disability advisor] here and really fighting for what I needed . . . but . . . part of it is like as I said, most of my degree has been online. . . So if I have not been well, I have been in bed doing my homework. . . . I've been, you know, relaxing and doing my school work there. Umm, when it came to like winter and commuting, my teachers were quite understanding of my situation. I drive an hour and half. It's snow. Umm, I don't feel well in the winter . . . generally . . . so having the understanding of the teachers from the information given from Student Disability Services also allowed for me to take courses that I've wanted to take, like choir courses and stuff like that . . .*

It would seem that for these women, feeling supported and cared for by others within the university showed them that they were not alone in their experiences. This was certainly vital for women like Michapentimento and Rose, who often needed that understanding from others on campus because they either did not have someone at home who understood their situation and could help them, or due to the nature of their disability they sometimes could not make it in to class. It was also the case in this study, that caring interactions, where others on campus like professors and advisors in some way

demonstrated to the women that they cared about them, became critically important not only for the success of these women on campus, but in numerous other ways as well.

### *Interactions of Caring*

While many of the women in this study discussed a variety of issues and negative encounters that occurred with their professors, ten of the women interviewed (roughly 63%) also mentioned a specific interaction of caring with another person on campus, the majority of these occurring with their disability advisors and professors. These interactions were characterized most often by these advisors and professors demonstrating to the women in one way or another that they cared about them. Sometimes it was just allowing them to come in and talk to them when they needed to, taking extra time to explain material to them, or actively engaging in making their academic environments better.

Strikingly, of the ten women that discussed one of these specific interactions, 80% of them also said they were successful in school. This is an important link to consider, as often, people with disabilities who establish strong support systems around them have been shown to be more successful in their academic environments (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Gregg, 2007; Hogansen et al., 2008; Troiano et al., 2010; Wilson, Getzel, & Brown, 2000). Rose for example, stated the following about her disability advisor:

*I think the relationship for me with my disability advisor, [name], has been what has made it work. Cause she also has a disability and she understands where I'm coming from cause it's a physical issue . . . so she has actually been able to . . . make it easier for me to engage in my classes. Because if I'm sore, I don't wanna listen to my teacher lecture for an hour and a half. . . . I totally block out what's going on . . . which doesn't help me academically. . . . So by her having everything set up for me and **continually** making sure I'm OK, it's allowed me to succeed in where I am now.*

Similarly, in Melanie's discussions about her disability advisor, she noted that he was a



source of constant encouragement for her:

*My disability advisor's really good . . . . I go bug him all the time [light laughter]. . . . Yeah, my disability advisor's like my go-to person [light laughter] . . . It's really awesome. . . . I think actually the **most** helpful thing, like, it sounds like a little thing maybe, but he reminds me that I'm smart [light laughter]. . . . He reminds me that I'm capable. . . . Like, he encourages me . . . and . . . just, we've talked a lot about what learning disabilities are and what they aren't and how to advocate for yourself and stuff. . . . So, it's not even so much like the specific academic stuff . . . but, more the personal stuff. . . . I think it would be more difficult [without him there]. . . . I think cause, sometimes I need another person to kind of help me work through things and decide what I'm gonna do if I have a situation with a professor or . . . if I start doubting myself . . . because I do [light laughter]. . . . And, yeah I think it would just—I would have to rely on myself more and that'd be harder.*

It has been the case in other studies that "disability support providers frequently give students a valuable human connection to the institution's services" (Dowrick et al., 2005, p. 43), which is important as often "people with disabilities operate within social and cultural contexts that disregard, dismiss, and devalue them" (Olney & Brockelman, 2003, p. 36). For Melanie specifically, these meetings and strong connection with her disability advisor proved invaluable for her when negotiating the often difficult terrain of a postsecondary campus. Not only did her advisor consistently remind her that she was intelligent and that she *belongs*, but they also had important discussions about how to be an effective self-advocate. Much like Rose's experience, the positive relationship that Melanie has built with her advisor has perhaps been such a strong bond because he has shown her time and again that she matters and that he cares about her postsecondary experience. This alone may have shown Melanie that she is not doing this by herself, but she has someone who is constantly and *consistently* in her corner.

In addition to caring interactions among the women and their academic advisors, positive encounters between the women and their professors in relation to care were also

mentioned. Jenn and Marie for instance, discussed their experiences with their calculus and anatomy professors, respectively:

*Yeah, and so for the positive experience . . . I can't remember which class but it was, I think it was calculus first semester . . . it was another lab thing but . . . more like a tutorial. I—basically we would do homework in a class . . . and I wasn't—I was rarely able to finish it on time and . . . the one day I had a lot of questions on it and so the . . . the professor . . . stayed like an hour late to . . . sit down with me and help me get through the problems.*

Marie added:

*I would say the [interaction with my] anatomy professor . . . in Human Kinetics [was positive for me]. Uh, I would go and talk to him a couple times about tests, just like, to make sure I'm learning the right stuff . . . I'm on the right track, and he, and like . . . the next couple of times I went in he remembered me. And like, we talked about one of the sports I was in, and he remembered that and he asked about it. . . . And . . . it was . . . like he cared about what you were doing. . . . He cared about where you were going. And then I saw him last week, and this was like a year later . . . and he remembered me still. . . . So . . . that felt nice.*

It has been stated previously by Cook et al. (2009) that a student's postsecondary success "particularly in the academic realm, is to some degree determined by the type and quality of interactions that he or she has with his or her instructors" (p. 84). In the experiences that Jenn and Marie described, both of their professors took extra time out of their schedules to either sit down and ensure that the material was being understood, or simply to get to know them and their interests and hobbies. For Marie specifically, she was shocked to find that even a year later, the same professor remembered who she was and asked how she was doing, which showed her that he really did care about her as a person.

Further, when asked about her most positive experiences as a student at the university, Michelle said, "oh my goodness . . . let's see, most positive. I can think of two . . . one's from a professor perspective and one's from Disability Services . . . it was actually last year." Interestingly, however, before she begins to discuss the positive

aspects of her interactions on campus she drew attention to notable problems within the system itself. Problems which may have allowed her to recognize caring interactions with others much more clearly. She stated:

*How it works for exam time is they send . . . an email to the professors saying they need a copy of the exam. The professor emails the exam to Disability Services and they put it into the . . . assistive technology. . . . And so she had sent the test . . . to Disability Services and . . . the diagrams didn't like, render properly with the computer software and they were very fuzzy and unclear.*

The inability of Michelle's assistive technology to work properly is deeply troublesome and draws attention to greater systemic issues. Michelle's professor, however, responded in a way that helped change an incredibly stressful situation into a more positive one. She described this interaction in detail as she continued:

*And so I couldn't write the test because I couldn't see what the question was asking me to do. . . . And so I was waiting around and it was very stressful and they had to kinda keep me in the room and they were calling the prof and they were calling the prof and . . . she came in and I just remember so clearly—she came in and it was almost like she was like a panicked mother like, trying to get at a child. Like she was like, "Let me see her, let me talk to her, let me talk to her" and she . . . pulls up a chair and she sits down beside me and she read every single question to me . . . as opposed to the computer doing it for me, and went through the diagrams and like, redrew it a bit and showed me and—I would do the test along beside her as she read it to me and she sat with me the whole time, clarified all my questions and then she took the test and not only that, but she ended up following up with the advisors at Disability Services who deal with the technology . . . to figure out how she can make the format clearer or what she can do better for next time **and** followed up with me to make sure I was still understanding the material and you know, that everything was OK on her end . . . it was just going above and beyond.*

This experience with her professor clearly meant something significant to Michelle. It is obvious that in Michelle's experience, an interaction like this with a professor has never happened before. This action alone seemed to make a very positive impression on Michelle. She continued:

*It was so nice to see somebody take such an interest and . . . she said to me later, cause . . . I thanked her for it you know, and not many profs would go above and*

*beyond the way you did, and she said, "You know, I do recognize that you have a learning disability and I get that but there are other students in the class who probably haven't even been diagnosed and . . . they would benefit from the same sort of attention and so this is something I feel strongly about for all of my students . . . so it's not just because you have a learning disability but it's just because I want everybody to succeed" . . . and that was just such a reflection of her character . . . and it was just very sweet of her. . . . yeah . . . that was very positive.*

Her professor's understanding that she needs to create an environment where *all* of her students have the ability to succeed was something that was quite profound for Michelle, perhaps because the concept of inclusion based on rights, rather than pity is still relatively new to postsecondary educators (Csolli, Bennett, & Gallagher, 2009). Perhaps Michelle's recognition of the importance of this "paradigm shift" (2009, p. 60) also prompted her to discuss these incidences as something truly constructive and innovative in her postsecondary experiences.

In the second of her two most positive experiences on campus, Michelle began by recalling how supportive the staff at the disability office on campus has been toward her.

She noted:

*I guess just the flip side to the original stories I told you was . . . the . . . advisors at Disability Services just coming to my rescue every time I couldn't solve a problem on my own and how they would just go to bat for me regardless of what the issue was.*

In order to show just how important they have been in her undergraduate career, Michelle went on to describe a situation where a woman at Disability Services did not order the textbooks she required for her courses. While this may be particularly demoralizing for a student with a disability on campus, it was the reaction of the people within disability services to remedy the situation that Michelle found to be positive. She went on to say:

*There was a problem in Disability Services with another employee . . . the woman who was . . . responsible for ordering textbooks just didn't order my textbooks one day and I had put pressure on her like, "Hey, it's coming up, it's coming up you*

*know, the midterm is coming up you know, when am I gonna get the textbooks?" and she was just like, "Yeah, later, later." And turned out, she just kinda **forgot** to put the order in. Umm, and so I didn't get the textbook until after the midterm and it wasn't until then that the issue could have been addressed but the people in Disability Services, the manager, the advisors, they all sort of came together, met with me, met with **her** separately and you know, disciplined her as appropriate, worked with me and my prof to let me retake the exam after having read the material cause I literally went into [it] blind because I didn't have a textbook and . . . and you know, she at first was a little hesitant but then they kind of explained to her like, "If a person who can't see can't get a Braille textbook, you know, you wouldn't—you would see that as unfair, but her brain is preventing her from seeing the words properly. . . . You need to let her rewrite it" and she ended up . . . understanding and . . . but they . . . came together very efficiently for that . . . and I was very impressed.*

It would seem that these two incidences in Michelle's experience, have impacted her greatly in very different ways. Despite the fact that Michelle had to give the woman constant reminders to order her books, the woman simply brushed them off. This is especially troubling, as this was a woman who worked in the Disability Services office and therefore, probably very familiar with the needs of students with disabilities. However, while many students would perhaps see this as a negative experience, Michelle was impressed with the swift action others at Disability Services took in her defense to ensure that she was properly prepared for her classes.

These specific interactions of caring shared by the women in this study undoubtedly had an overall positive effect on their perceptions and feelings about themselves, their university experiences, and their overall success in school. For many of these women, just knowing that they have someone there that they can count on, that will take the time to listen to them and understand their feelings and concerns, not only made them feel good about themselves, but also gave them the confidence they needed to continue. In fact, this confidence may have fuelled their desire to persevere in their university experiences, which became another important theme in this study.

*Self-Advocacy, Self-Determination, and Perseverance*

It is critically important for students with disabilities to develop self-determination by their being given choices in their academic lives on campus as these choices often lead them to becoming more responsible for their own personal outcomes and development of self-advocacy skills (Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003). Many of the women in this study believed that having self-determination, self-advocacy and perseverance was a critical component to their university experiences. Notably, many of them also described experiences where they used effective communication skills, had a true understanding of who they were and what they required, and confidence in order to get it. In fact, roughly 70% of the women that were interviewed noted many instances where they had to continually fight for themselves. Many of the women also felt that if they did not take action on their own behalf, the gap between themselves and their nondisabled peers on campus would only grow wider.

It was discovered during the interviews that many of the participants felt that if they did not continually self-advocate, they would be at a huge disadvantage compared to other able-bodied students. Joy, in her discussions about the importance of self-advocacy, noted:

*One hundred percent [you have to advocate for yourself]. There's no one advocating for you. . . . And they'll [Student Disability Services] tell you that. It's **your** job to come to us. . . . You're gonna fall between the cracks [if you don't self-advocate]. It's very simple . . . I already know people who have.*

Joy's statements allude to her heightened awareness of the underlying power and ableism that exists within postsecondary education. If a student with a disability wishes to be successful in the academically elite environment of the university they must jump through hoops to do so. They need to advocate for themselves, continually push for services and

resources when they feel they need help and, if they do not, they will simply be removed by the standards in place or remove themselves if they feel they cannot keep up.

Additionally, in describing what her experience at postsecondary school would look like if she did not advocate for herself, Anita believed it would look significantly different:

*If I didn't self-advocate I think that I would not have any accommodations. I would probably fail and not be in any courses at this point because without accommodations, I can't do the work. . . . So I find that if I don't fight for myself, it's not like anybody else will. . . . I can think of many [instances where I had to self-advocate] but I guess the one is where my professor told me that she wasn't going to give me accommodations because that's unfair to everybody else because I'm—I shouldn't even be in school, I'm gonna drop out, I'm not gonna make it in life. . . . And I feel like I had to push for my own rights and when the department head said, you know, that they weren't going to help, when I went to the next step up they said that they wouldn't help, I had to go to the president. . . . And he, and he was very pleased that I came and he was not surprised. He said that a lot of students end up there . . . and I found that once I told . . . Disability Services they kind of handled all the paperwork. . . . they handled it on their end, so I found that if I wouldn't have . . . told anyone . . . nothing would have been done.*

In her comments Anita describes how many times she had to take situations into her own hands in order to be on a "level playing field" (Hibbs & Pothier, 2006, p. 195) with nondisabled students. However, Anita took it into her own hands to speak to her department head and, when she felt that the department head was not helping to correct the situation, she went directly to the president of the university to voice her concerns.

Similarly, Rose felt that students with disabilities who are attending a postsecondary institution have no other option but to fight for themselves to get everything that they need. In her opinion, this is due in part, to there not being enough staff in Student Disability Services to support and advocate for the students if they are not receiving something they should be:

*You know . . . just you just gotta keep fighting through, you have to be a self-advocate in this day and age and you have to do it with doctors, you have to do it with your teachers, you just have **no choice**. . . . Cause your disability services cannot fight for every single person they have and being in a university of sixteen **thousand** students . . . there's like eight of them down there? . . . you have no choice but to fight for yourself.*

In many ways, Rose has come to terms with what she needs to do to be sure that she will have a positive and successful postsecondary experience and has developed the skills necessary to do so.

It seems that developing the necessary skills to self-advocate is an important factor in being able to advocate both continuously and successfully. For example, during our interview, Rose mentioned that she needs an ergonomically correct chair to sit in for all of her classes. However, many of her classes took place at a satellite campus, where this chair was often not ready for her to use. When asked how a typical conversation would go when she did have to advocate for herself for this reason and others, Rose stated:

*Well usually what would happen is I'd go to class and I would see that the proper chair is **not there** so then I'd have to sit through the whole class and then the next morning I was on the phone, talking to the disability services in [name of city of satellite campus location] saying, "What happened?" Like, "why—why wasn't it there?" and they would just say, "Oh, you know, it was our fault" and they would take ownership of it, but at the end of the day even though they're talking [sic] ownership it doesn't help. Like, you know it's there . . . you have no choice and so I would just call [name of disability advisor] in [name of city] and she would call them also and just say, "What are you doing?" . . . So—and then if it still wasn't there then I started going in there like **everyday** to say, "Are you gonna have it? Is it gonna be there?" and it came to the point where they actually told me it was my responsibility to call them and remind them. . . . To have my chair in that class.*

These types of experiences may be due in part, to the fact that attitudinal barriers are still considered to be exceptionally challenging for students with disabilities to overcome (Garrison-Wade, 2012), particularly for people with physical disabilities (Angell, Stoner,



& Fulk, 2010). Being a person with a physical disability, Rose certainly understands the challenges that she is facing in her postsecondary experiences and is prepared to deal with situations that may arise. Therefore, dealing with and persisting *through* these attitudes is often necessary for a successful postsecondary experience overall.

Similar to the research undertaken by Kurth and Mellard (2006), against many odds, the women in this study felt convinced that they could not only achieve academically, but they could also weather any difficulties they may encounter in order to do so. Like Rose, many of the women interviewed discussed situations throughout their postsecondary academic experiences that required a great deal of perseverance and self-determination to overcome. Kelly noted her experiences of getting into law school, and how, upon entry, felt she did not belong and only gained entry because she was

Aboriginal. She noted:

*So I got into law school once, only because I'm Aboriginal. And I walked in there and I instantly . . . drew back because I looked around and I saw a bunch of A students, I'm not an A student, and I couldn't compete with them . . . and I haven't even tried yet, but I just knew that I couldn't compete with them. And I felt as if I didn't get in based on my own merit, so that's what I'm tryin' to do. . . . I'm trying to prove to myself that I **can** put in the effort needed to get A's and maybe get into law school with my own merit. . . . No, [it wasn't here] it was [name of university] but . . . still. . . . [I decided to pull out of that program and return here] To try to get A's . . .*

Despite her earlier struggles, Kelly decided to go back to her undergraduate coursework and endure it once more in order to achieve high grades to get in to law school once again on what she believed would be her own merit, rather than her cultural background.

Anne also noted that sometimes her visual impairment makes it hard for her to go places alone so she often has to call a friend to take her where she needs to go. However, if for some reason they refuse, she continues to ask until they agree:

*I mean, when I really need to go to somewhere and I find it's hard for me to go by myself. Sometimes I need to text to my friend, "OK, could you walk to me there?" or whatever. It's kind of, you really want to be independent . . . and you feel like . . . you are a responsible adult for yourself, but sometimes, OK I really **can't** do that like, physically. . . . It sometimes can be frustrating, honestly. . . . And when I kind of get lost on campus . . . like for several times, that's not fun [laughter] I mean . . . [If somebody says they can't take me] I would just ask, keep asking and that usually works.*

Persistence, for some women in this study, continued as they had a desire to be independent academically and also to show others with disabilities that they can do it too. Joy for example, noted that discovering what works for her academically is critical to her success. Much like other students with learning challenges, Joy has found a way to "survive" and persevere by discovering what works for her, and finding a sense of what Getzel and Thoma (2008) called "self-awareness" (p. 80) in order to determine academically, what works for her and what does not:

*Yeah, no . . . it's kind of really . . . kind of a, what's the theory? Only the strong survive, who is it—it's not—it's not Freud, it's . . . it's on the tip of my tongue. You know what I'm talkin' about?. . . Yeah, you know what I mean?. . . Only the strong survive . . . that's exactly what it is. . . . You know, only the strong—like that's how I look at it is . . . if you're gonna do it well, you better do it. . . . But I use like, my own resources like, so I'll send it to my mom . . . I'll send it to her via email and she'll read the words to me that I've highlighted . . . cause I don't know them. I have an incredible boyfriend who will read me out a page of bio notes for words I don't know. . . . I guess you have to find what works for you.*

Similarly, Anita added:

*I'm feeling like . . . I have surprised myself because my whole life and even coming here I, I had people saying I wouldn't make it through grade school, I wouldn't make it through high school and now to have professors say I'm not gonna make it through university, well I keep proving people wrong. And I've always known myself that I could do it but it's nice to be able I guess, show others that I can.*

Both Joy and Anita's comments alluded to the fact that students with disabilities who persevere throughout postsecondary school have made it through a sort of "natural

selection" process. Her statements referring to Darwin's theories on survival of the fittest, reflect a larger societal problem regarding ableism. Namely, that if a person with a disability can *survive* within an arena designed mainly for able-bodied and nondisabled students, then they may be considered worthy of citizenship within this elite group of *normal* citizens. Often though, an individual may not be able to do this alone.

While it is true that perseverance to push on is usually an individual trait, often supportive family members and friends played a role in the continued eagerness that these women soldiered on. Brooke, a nineteen-year-old student with a learning challenge in the Faculty of Education, noted the importance of both having a supportive person in her life, and persevering to show others who have disabilities that they can do it too. She noted:

*I feel like confidence is all that I have sometimes [laughter] like, literally nothing else. I had two midterms yesterday and I'm crying to my sister on the phone [laughter] . . . I'm like, "I can't do it, I . . . ", she's like, "No, like you are a strong, independent woman . . . like, you can do it." Confidence has been **everything** to me. . . . and even presenting things and doing these kind of things it's really important to just know that you are who you are for a reason . . . and do what you can with that . . . I'm like this . . . for a reason . . . and maybe it's to help someone else . . . who's like me and it's really important I feel like and I can hundred percent do it. . . . Pfff, people say that I can't, good try . . . [laughter].*

For many students with disabilities, having support from those closest to them in their lives like family members and friends is incredibly important as it often gives "...them continued strength, determination, and drive...despite difficult circumstances" (Angell et al., 2010). Perhaps, this source of support that Brooke feels has allowed her to continue to persevere in her academic life on campus. By having someone like her sister to constantly lift her up and motivate her to continue has perhaps also given her the belief and confidence in herself that she can continue to push on and achieve her goals, even against all odds.

Self-advocacy, self-determination, and perseverance were critical to the overall academic success and experiences for the women with disabilities in this study. Many women felt that without the development of these skills, they would be even further behind their nondisabled peers on campus. The recognition by these women of the negative and harmful attitudes and misconceptions that still exist about people with disabilities may have played a significant role in their continued efforts to advocate and endure, despite any odds they may face. These odds may include how classroom evaluations are being conducted, another major theme in the data.

#### *Variety in Evaluations*

Many participants in this study discussed the variety in evaluations that appear within their academic courses on campus. Twenty-five percent of the women in this study noted that there was not a lot of variety of evaluations within their classes. Roughly 19% of the participants noted, however, that variety in evaluations depended on the class. Some classes did do a good job of providing many different kinds of opportunities for evaluation, while others did not. Another 19% of the participants felt that there was variety in evaluations within their classes. However, and perhaps most interestingly, roughly 48% of the participants, all with learning challenges, noted that being able to demonstrate to professors what they know through presentations, oral exams, or writing tasks would be most beneficial for them academically. According to the participants, these methods of evaluation would allow them to explain themselves thoroughly and really present their understanding of the material, rather than just what they can memorize. Only two of the study participants said that multiple choice testing was a method that worked for them. This is especially unfortunate, however, as most postsecondary institutions evaluate students using multiple choice testing and exams

(DiBattista & Kurzawa, 2011). In addition, some courses have very few evaluations throughout the course of the semester, making the stakes for each test or exam that much higher for those that are writing it.

Marie for example, felt that since there are so few evaluations, there was little room for error if she wanted to end up with a good grade at the end of the course:

*Mmm, [long pause] . . . maybe have different ways to evaluate [could help my academic experience be more successful]? . . . Cause for me, the exams, if I'm—if I know that I'm fully prepared for an exam . . . I'm fine. Like, if I know that I know **absolutely** everything then I'm OK, I won't forget stuff, but if I'm sort of nervous for the exam and I go into it and I see a question and I see the amount—amount of marks it's worth . . . if I freak out, then I'll probably blank on it . . . And then it's gone. . . . so having mostly exams . . . like, one of my classes is a fifty percent midterm and a fifty percent final. . . . So having just exams as how they're evaluating you I find, hard, very hard, because you could be very smart and mess up an exam. . . . And that messes up your mark.*

In addition, Anna shared many of the feelings of the women in this study when discussing testing using multiple choice. She felt that if she were allowed to explain her thinking, it would not only show to her professors that she understands the material, but it would also be much easier for her to get a good grade in the course:

*Probably [would be helpful to have a variety of ways to evaluate], because multiple-choice isn't one of my strengths, like, I have a lot of difficulty narrowing it down to one of four. . . . I like to be able to explain, "Here is why I think it's this." . . . So even just short-answer questions for me are better than multiple-choice.*

Similarly, Melanie added:

*Most of my classes are a lot of multiple choice but some written assignments too . . . Like, almost all my classes are some combination of multiple choice exams like, one or two midterms and a final, and then usually one big paper . . . or a couple little written assignments . . . Yeah, actually [it would be better if there were a variety of ways professors evaluated] I always wish that some of my classes could have like, oral exams cause I'm a lot better at that . . . than writing . . . I'm not a bad writer but I take forever to get my thoughts together and write a paper and I'm a procrastinator . . . so I don't get stuff in on time or I cram for tests but I actually understand the material . . . a lot of the time . . . so I wish that some of my profs would do that, I think . . . that'd be cool. . . . I wish we had more class*

*discussions, like my classes are so big . . . and I think I could probably focus a lot better too . . .*

These comments are unfortunate, as "the adolescent and adult population with learning disabilities (LD) continues to be underserved and underprepared to meet the demands of postsecondary education (Gregg, 2007, p. 219). Underserved perhaps, because "conventional approach[es] to assessment limits the ways in which students can demonstrate what they know" (Izzo et al., 2008, p. 68).

Universal design for learning (UDL) for students with disabilities across the postsecondary environment is critical as "it encourages professionals to provide better access to learning opportunities for everyone, not just students with disabilities" (Gregg, 2007, p. 226; see also Izzo et al., 2008; Katsiyannis, Zhang, Landmark, & Reber, 2009).

Joy and Maria's comments for example, seem to reflect this research:

*I'll disclose a bit about my disability then to make it easier. Mine's in reading, writing, and mathematics . . . so it w—it's what they call global. . . . So . . . reading an essay and writing a response isn't so great. Umm, that's why like, if you did like the one-on-one testing where I can verbally communicate, again with a high-functioning, I'm just like everyone else then . . . Right? . . . It's not that hard . . . so that's really good if you can verbalize it with your professor.*

Similarly, Maria remarked:

*Yeah, actually . . . one of my favourite classes this term we have one midterm, one exam, we have a debate and we have like, there are so many ways you can get marks and that . . . does really help me because for instance . . . about the consistency thing, like, what if I'm good most of the semester and then I'm bad at the end? Or what if I'm bad at the beginning, good at the end, you know? . . . Having . . . sort of like a more flexible schedule helps me but also being able to show my knowledge and what I have learned in different ways would help me too because I know sometimes I take a class with a peer and then like after, I feel like . . . I have better understanding of everything we learned and . . . I'm more interested in the stuff that we learned than they are but yet, they have a mark twice as better [sic] as me. Like, I . . . barely pass and then, but I still feel like I know so much more.*

While presentations and writing tasks are sometimes used as assessment tools in early years of an undergraduate degree where the class sizes are larger, these methods of evaluation are few and far between. Therefore, if faculty members created a variety of ways to be assessed for an overall course grade, "students have the option of choosing learning modalities that capitalize on their individual strengths, thus improving the likelihood of success in the class" (Izzo et al., 2008, p. 68). Perhaps then, many of these women would feel as if their overall course grades truly reflected their knowledge of the material. This is especially the case when many of the women in this study had high aspirations for their future career prospects, prospects that often required high grades as well.

#### *Future Aspirations*

During the course of the interviews, twelve of the women discussed their future aspirations beyond their undergraduate degree. Notably, roughly 69% of the participants stated that they desired an advanced degree beyond their undergraduate study. These advanced degrees included doctorates, bachelors of education, law, and other graduate work including nursing, psychology, public health, and medicine. Jenn for example, stated her desire to earn her doctorate degree and teach at a university. She said, "I would like to get my PhD in . . . astrophysics. . . . And I want to . . . study at a university when I'm done. . . . Yeah [maybe work at a university]."

Several of the other women discussed their future aspirations to achieve advanced degrees in several fields. Anita for instance, noted her aspirations to have a career in law after her undergraduate degree. She stated:

*I'm hoping to get into the double major of law school and then masters of . . . social work. . . . And then I'm hoping to become a lawyer. . . . I'm hoping to get*

*into something either with family or with disabilities. I haven't quite decided yet. . . . But I definitely want to get into law.*

Similarly, Melanie also wished to earn a postgraduate degree in psychology, as it is a subject area that she has come to love. While Melanie did not have an exact specialization of psychology that she would like to focus on just yet, she knew that it was something she ultimately wants to do. She added:

*[I want to do] Everything [laughter]. . . . I want to do everything [laughter]. . . . No, I . . . I really like psychology . . . so I want to go on to grad school . . . get my Master's, probably my PhD cause I really just, really, really love the subj—I don't know what area yet . . . cause I wanna do everything . . . so I don't know. . . . I'm pretty into neuroscience . . . and I'm into applied social too though, so . . . I don't know [laughter].*

These women clearly had a strong will and desire to achieve. Not only did they just want to finish school and move on with an undergraduate degree, they wanted to pursue education at the highest levels of their chosen fields. In addition to this, they had a lot of confidence that they would be successful in doing so. Many women in this study expressed not only the importance and desires to achieve graduate degrees and other postsecondary educational goals, but also described the concept of "having it all" (Hogensen et al., 2008, p. 220). Which, according to the authors is "the dream of having both a career and a family" (2008, p. 219-220). Yet, these participants certainly have many challenges to face in their educational careers in order to achieve everything they want.

Most of the women in the current study, when asked about how confident they felt in their ability to achieve their goals, stated that they felt very confident or fairly confident that they could. Jenn, a participant in my study, in response to the question of how confident she felt in achieving her goals of attaining a doctoral degree in astrophysics said:



*I feel fairly confident. Umm, I didn't at the beginning of the semester because everything seemed **much** harder this year but, I've done **really** well so far so I think I'm actually going to be able to do it.*

Similarly, Anne added:

*I'm pretty confident about that cause . . . you know, when I was younger people kind of made those kind of predictions like, "you can't do this, you can't do that" but I would say, "OK, I can and I'm gonna prove that" and I was . . . successful. . . So, I would be pretty confident about my future, about things that I really want to do no matter like, what the environment looks like or what people say.*

The display by both of these women of confidence in themselves and their abilities as well as the work ethic to achieve their goals is especially important, according to Lindstrom et al., (2011), as findings from their study indicated that these two factors improved skills "and created opportunities for career advancement and higher wage employment options" (Lindstrom et al., 2011, p. 430) for the participants.

Similarly, Joy for example, felt a lot of confidence in her abilities to achieve her future career goals. She also noted an understanding of herself and her abilities as a person with a learning challenge:

*Oh, I'm very confident in myself. . . . where I'm not confident is . . . written work. So when you're—OK, more in social work less in public health cause you're going out and talking . . . about health promotion, like I wanna do social and behavioural patterns . . . so like, I basically just wanna—like Ebola comes next time I basically wanna tell you, "Don't . . . touch your eyes!" . . . And, "Wear . . . masks!" but . . . in social work, all case notes. . . . So if your case notes aren't good enough and you work for CAS [Children's Aid Society] you are going to court with those case notes. . . . If they can't really spell it out like, they can throw you out . . . as not a credible witness . . . in judgment. So, I would never personally go into a field that was heavy writing. I always wanted to be a lawyer, I can't go to court and write notes. . . . it's just never gonna happen . . . . And that's fine, just as people with Epilepsy could never drive a car. . . . You know, just as I could never walk around without my glasses on . . . . You have to understand that and work around it. . . . It's a tough pill to swallow. It takes, I think, maturity to understand it . . . as I would phrase it to people.*

For Joy, this thorough understanding of herself may have made it easier to recognize which subject and career areas may be better suited for her. In their study on women with

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Hinckley and Alden (2005) found that one of the success factors for these women was "the ability to self-reflect and use self-knowledge to create and adjust academic strategies" (p. 13). Joy's heightened awareness and "maturity" has, in many ways, allowed her to work toward what she considers to be achievable and lofty career ambitions.

For the few women in this study who felt they were not confident in their abilities to achieve, many of them expressed a sense of self-doubt as the reason why. Kelly for instance, stated:

*I could do it if I like, I was given the opportunity once, and I blew it [pause], I don't know if I can financially handle that again. I was more in a position to handle it financially before but now, even if I was offered the opportunity I think I would do everything in my power to financially be OK with it, but I don't think they'll offer it to me again. . . . There's no way. I mean, my LSATs suck cause it's all multiple-choice, there's no accommodations for that. There's nothing you can do—oh, there's a little writing portion, actually, but, yeah. . . . Confidence, not so much.*

Kelly felt that it was due to her disability that she will never be able to achieve at the level she wants. Since standardized tests like the LSAT are mainly multiple choice tests, students with learning challenges may be at a particular disadvantage. The desired outcome for the creators of the tests are clear however: students who cannot do well on *their* test will never be successful in *their* field. This undoubtedly had an impact on Kelly's outlook.

Similarly, Amélie also expressed some doubt when she discussed her desire to attend law school after the completion of her undergraduate degree. She said: "It's gonna be very difficult. . . . Because I don't know any law students went to [name of university] who had disability [sic]." Again, much like Kelly, Amélie felt that her disability would somehow impact her achievement. Because she had never seen another student in the law

school that has a disability, they either must not exist, never earned acceptance, or were not successful in the program. Therefore, in Amélie's mind, if they could not push through she may not be able to either.

Overall, despite feelings of self-doubt from only a few of the participants, the majority of women in this study felt confident to achieve their often very lofty educational goals. This may be because women in this study had persisted for so long through elementary school, secondary school, and now are persisting through a postsecondary degree, an area where many people with disabilities often do not.

The second powerful theme that emerged from the examination of the data, was the way in which the experience of being a woman and having a disability shaped the social life of the participants within the post secondary context. It is this theme that I turn to now.

### **The Experience of Women and Disability in Postsecondary Social Life**

#### *Socially Active*

Students with disabilities do not engage in university life at the same rate or in the same way that their nondisabled peers do. The reasons for this trend are multiple and complex. Wilson et al. (2000), discovered, for example, that the ability to fully participate in social activities around campus is lacking for students with disabilities due to the personnel involved. One facet of Wilson's study was a survey completed by students with various disabilities including learning challenges and physical disabilities. In this survey, students with disabilities felt that those who work for various student organizations gave virtually no thought to their special needs when it came to their participation in certain activities and, "no programming had been planned specifically with students with disabilities in mind", particularly for students with physical disabilities (Wilson et al.,

2000, p. 46). However, being socially active on campus was very important to the vast majority of the women interviewed for this study. In fact, roughly 88% of the participants were socially active in some capacity on campus in at least one group or club activity. In addition, nine of the participants that said they were socially involved were active in several university activities. Interestingly, 25% of the women who are socially active hold leadership positions in the groups or clubs that they are involved in including vice-presidential, presidential, advisory, executive, or director positions.

Joy, for instance, was involved in many different organizations and groups around the campus community, including a presidential position with one of them. She stated:

*I'm currently the President of [name of university mascot] Nation and the co-founder of it, which is the [name of university's] . . . official fan club of the [name of university mascot] . . . which is enhancing campus spirit . . . and that's a co-initiative with the Student Interest Project Coordinator [name of person], [name of person], [name of person], and [name of person]. . . . I am also currently an alumni of the [name] Sorority. I was an RA for a year. I was part of Walk Safe. I was heavily involved with the [name] last year and none of the above. . . . I have volunteered for the Alumni Association at every single event they've ever had since my first year. I have worked with the Alumni Association. . . . It's an **exhausting** list. . . . Oh, I also volunteer with Student Disability Services, giving students advice, like when they have like, their . . . panels, I always speak on their panel. . . . I think they just pick me cause I'm pretty. . . . I'm ninety-eight percent convinced. . . . the school is my life . . . Oh, and . . . I had a[n] eight month placement at Legal Assistance of [name of city] as a social work student.*

Michelle, much like Joy, was also involved with several campus organizations. She also held a leadership position in an advisory role in the Emergency Response Team at the university:

*So clubs that I was involved in . . . the biggest . . . one that I've been in was the [name of university] Emergency Response Team. . . . I've been on the team since 2008 when I joined university. Umm, went through the ranks and now I have like a behind-the-scenes advisor role so I'm not actively responding to emergencies on campus anymore but, I'm helping in the training of new members and operations which is a great opportunity and I met most of my friends and my common law husband there . . . and . . . learned skills, learned that I wanted to be a nurse from doing that. Umm, let's see, I did . . . Residence Council in my first year of*

*university. Loved that as well, it was also kinda fun. . . . I was a floor rep in residence. Umm, I feel like there must have been more than that. Umm, I sort of informally work as like a mentor in Disability Services . . . like helping out, speaking at events . . . speaking to [name of transition event] kids. It's informal because I don't have like, a position I applied for but . . . I do it regularly [light laughter]. . . . They ask me [to volunteer]. . . . I work on campus . . . as a lifeguard. . . . I feel like there must have been something else. I'm just always busy.*

According to Goode (2007), "coming to university constitutes for many a big step in the process of forming an independent personal and social identity" (p. 40). Perhaps for Joy and Michelle, the formation of this identity came via the participation in many types of social activities as it may help them to feel like they are a part of something bigger than themselves. In addition, it may also be an opportunity for them to earn full citizenship (Devlin & Pothier, 2006) and perhaps prove to others that they also deserve a place among the often white, heterosexual, able-bodied elite that often dominate postsecondary education.

Natalie, however, in her discussions about social involvement on campus, noted that upon entering university she first became involved in a sorority, which did not work out well for her. After this, however, she joined an organization which allowed her to feel like she was volunteering for the greater good, while also fighting injustice:

*I wasn't at first and then I went and joined a sorority, that was a bad idea. . . . I'm too sensitive for that. . . . and now I'm still . . . with Engineers Without Borders. . . . working for international development. I think that we are really underutilizing individuals who experience . . . invisible disabilities as an asset when looking at social justice. . . . no actually [that wasn't my main reason for participating]. I was kinda putting my disabilities aside. . . . I didn't even see it as that . . . . I saw it as, "This is an opportunity."*

While she stated she was not thinking about her disability when she chose to participate, Natalie may have also been unintentionally wishing to prove to herself and others what students with an invisible disability are truly capable of accomplishing. Natalie continued:

*I actually first wanted to be in the group because there was a junior fellowship program which is an internship overseas and I saw that as . . . “Wow! This looks cool” . . . I really want experience overseas but, it seems so incomplete with some of the . . . it’s called voluntourism . . . but it’s still valuable in an extent, but I wanted something that was more meaningful and real and the advertisement was basically like . . . “You’re gonna hate it, but it’s good,” kinda thing. . . . And, “You’re gonna feel jaded cause you didn’t actually make change but, it’s the awareness that you have from it.” I loved it. So that’s actually why . . . and then . . . from there I . . . just fell in love with the, the understanding that they had . . . and they were Engineers Without Borders, I’m in social work/disability studies . . . and . . . I had no idea I could join and when I did, it felt like I was at peace because I was with people that actually were more in tune with injustice.*

Compared to her experiences in the sorority where she may have felt like she did not belong, participating in a group like Engineers Without Borders allowed her to make connections with people who may have understood some of the issues she has faced in her own life. It may be the case that by participating in activities that Natalie deems as important not only to herself but to the world around her, it has given her a sense of belonging and inclusion that the sole participation in academic tasks would not.

Researchers have shown that one of the important skills that students with disabilities state as being essential for their postsecondary experience is being able to create their own systems of support (Getzel & Thoma, 2008). Kelly also discussed the importance for her, of participating in the Turtle Island organization:

*We [Turtle Island] are a resource . . . facility. We help Natives feel that sense of community that’s **super** important. As you know, they’re underrepresented . . . in **all** areas of life. Umm, but we do homework clubs for high school kids, we wanna make sure that they stay in a high school and come into postsecondary school, cause again, they’re underrepresented here, and we want them to be successful. And there’s a lot of **brilliant** Natives out there and they’re gonna do great things, especially with the funding and being financially secure.*

Perhaps then, for many of these women, including Kelly, taking part and creating their own support systems on campus through their participation in activities like Turtle Island

may help them to feel a sense of encouragement and support that helps them continue to push on in spite of any odds they may face (Getzel & Thoma, 2008).

In discussions about why they chose to be socially active on campus, the women in this study described many reasons for doing so. These included things like participation is a good networking tool, it helps to get into a graduate program, they wanted to meet new people, participating in a certain organization felt right and the organization worked hard to get volunteers, empowering others and wanting to make a difference, and a personal interest in the organization itself and what it stands for. Amélie for example, noted that her participation gives her the opportunity to network and connect with other people from whom she may be able to learn something. She added:

*Networking. . . . Ah ha, it is definitely help me [sic] . . . networking, because I see every person you meet is another opportunity to get to know that person because you never know what this person can give it to you [sic] and what you can learn from that person.*

Anita, Anne, and Melanie though, participated in social activities because they feel personally invested in the groups they are working for because they can relate with the struggles of underrepresented populations and groups. Anita noted:

*I wanted to join autism awareness because I feel very strongly about autism and that we need awareness so I joined that to kind of help make a difference . . . or do my part. . . . I feel like people with any type of disabilities always need help, so I feel like if I were in their shoes, I would like for somebody to step up and help me. . . . I joined pre-law because I'm hoping to get into law, into law school, so I just kind of wanted to make sure that I have some type of experience with it. . . . [I joined Autism Awareness specifically] Just because I feel very strongly about it. I find that . . . like me, myself having a disability I know it can be difficult when people don't understand what it is . . . and when people don't raise awareness about it so I feel like raising money to get these organizations to talk about it . . . and tell people what it is . . . because these, these disabilities . . . like they're fairly new. . . . So, I find that the more information we can get out in the public about **any** type of disability at least we'll make some type of difference.*

Similarly, Anne stated:

*Well, I really [sic] like, personally interested in that area too [disabilities]. . . . Like, I would say I came from a developing country to here and I can really see like, how the gender like ability like, sexism, ableism, this kind of stuff can . . . influence a person's development. I can really relate to that for sure.*

Melanie added:

*Just because I care a lot about mental health . . . and, like it means a lot to me personally . . . cause I have anxiety too, so . . . and I just think . . . it's stigmatized and I also tend to care a lot about kind of marginalized groups. . . . And I'm big on advocacy and de-stigmatizing issues.*

All three of these women expressed a deep compassion and understanding of the populations that they considered underrepresented, stigmatized, and marginalized on campus, so much so that they felt compelled to volunteer and help make a difference in the social perceptions and attitudes toward these groups. Perhaps this is because they recognized and related to these feelings and may have felt compelled to work to address and eradicate these types of negative social experiences to ensure that other people on campus feel supported and welcome. It is important to consider then, how their own social interactions with others on campus has impacted their personal university experiences as well.

### *Social Interactions*

In the discussions regarding social interactions with their peers, nine of the women interviewed (roughly 56% of the participants) felt that overall, the interactions were positive ones. This is promising, because according to research conducted by Bruder and Mogro-Wilson (2010), nearly half of undergraduate students in their sample did not have any social interactions with a person who had a disability outside of work or the classroom, even though the same percentage (45%) of these students stated that they had family or friends that had a disability. Marie noted:



*Yeah [my relationships with my peers are pretty positive] . . . Yeah. Positive . . . [slight pause] . . . I don't know like always like refer to me as . . . like, the nicest person they've ever met . . . kinda thing. Umm, like, I'll do things for people like, anything, even if I just met you like I'll help you out if you need help. . . . they usually talk more, my friends usually . . . will talk more [sound of papers being rubbed together]. . . . see I'm very quiet. . . . [shuffling paper] but they're all very nice.*

It seems that for Marie, having this identity of being the nice, quiet friend has helped her to continue many of her social relationships on campus. Navigating these social relationships is extremely important for students with disabilities as, according to Dowrick et al. (2005), "peer support can significantly increase success in postsecondary education for students with disabilities" (p. 45). In addition, Marie seems to have an understanding of her role within her peer group. Perhaps by Marie establishing this identity allowed Marie to both feel and know that she has an important role to play among them. Like Marie, Michelle also felt that her relationships with her peers are often very positive:

*I would say [my peers are] pretty positive [in their response to me socially]. . . . I have a group of friends that I constantly hang out with. Umm, the . . . people who I'm friendly with that aren't necessarily a close friend . . . like I have a lot of those [laughter] . . . I don't know what to say. . . . Like I'm friendly with most people, I don't have any like real enemies . . . if that's what you're asking [laughter].*

Further, Rose also added her positive experiences with her peers:

*Yeah, oh yeah [my relationships socially with my peers have been generally positive], my friends are really great. They understand that, you know, if I'm not walking very well, like, my friends will take my backpack from me . . . and carry it for me. . . . like, my friends are really on top of that. . . . so I have them to turn to if I'm . . . stuck. . . . Or, on Thursdays my husband comes to school with me . . . for the ride, so I always have him too.*

It is interesting to note that while Marie rooted her identity as a friend in her ability to help others, Rose attached the concept of great friends being those that help her in time of

need. Certainly for Rose, the unspoken understanding between her and her friends that help would be provided if she needs it, is something very important to her.

These opposing views and beliefs from Marie, a person with an invisible disability, and Rose, a person with a physical disability that sometimes expresses itself in visible ways, may lie in societal constructions of disability, both invisible and visible. It is important to note that perhaps these characterizations of visible disabilities that have permeated society in the past several decades may have contributed to the belief from others that those with visible disabilities require help to be successful, while those with invisible disabilities work to "pass" (Bernard-Brak et al., 2010, p. 420; see also, Valeras, 2010) as fitting into what society considers as normal in order to avoid these same depictions.

While just over half of the participants believed their social interactions with peers were positive, five of the women interviewed (31% of the sample) felt that their social encounters were negative or that they did not have many friends. Further, four out of the five of these were women with invisible disabilities. For Anita, these negative perceptions may have manifested themselves in her challenging experiences making friends on campus:

*And then [another challenging experience for me] I'd say [is] talking to other students in the class . . . I find that they haven't been very receptive to any type of . . . of conversation. . . . I don't know [why that is]. I've, I've never really been able to make friends . . . throughout my whole life . . . so coming here, I thought you know, it'll be different . . . because people are older . . . they'll understand more and I find that people are, it's basically the same thing. . . . it could just be that they're busy with their own work . . . . I know university is really stressful, especially when you know, during first year, during second year, people are just kind of getting in the swing of things so I feel like it could just be the stress on their own part. . . . So I'm not, I still haven't answered that one [light laughter].*

Reflected in Anita's comments is her inability to understand why establishing friendships is so difficult for her. She clearly would like to socialize with her peers and create lasting bonds with them, which she just has not been able to do. She also does not put the blame on the person themselves, but rather on the fact that they may be "too busy" or that the postsecondary environment may be "too stressful" for them to want to put effort into friend-type relationship with her. Of course, it is fair to say that not everyone in her classes is aware that Anita has an invisible disability, as it is something people cannot see.

It is interesting to note though, that perhaps this difficulty in making friends is because of the fact that women with disabilities do not feel like their peers quite understand them or their disability (Erten, 2011). Anna for example, stated: "[My peers respond] OK [to me socially]. . . . Cause some of my disability is social so I know there are some aspects that don't come across quite as appealing as others." These research findings are also reflected further in Brooke's comments:

*My best friend [name] wanted to . . . study with me and . . . I tried to study with her . . . and she's like, "It'll take us an hour to read it and we'll—we'll be through it" and I was like, "OK, like just an hour . . . like, I can't read anything in an hour!" . . . so I thought, "Yeah, let's do it" and it's really challenging when people wanna study with me and my friends wanna be there for me and I can't. They just don't understand that I take things **a lot** slower and **a lot** differently than them. And they get it now a little bit . . . but even still it's hard.*

The concept of being misunderstood may also be mirrored in Maria's description of a particularly negative situation from her own social experience in her first year on campus:

*OK . . . well, I would say one of the biggest . . . experiences I've ever had here where . . . in residence [sic]. Umm, my first year I . . . asked to be put on the quiet floor cause . . . my residence had ten floors and one of them was a quiet floor. Umm, and . . . I chose this because my brother attended [name of university] and just from his experience like, I saw that there was a lot of partying in res so I wanted to come here . . . to be focused on my schooling so I thought that would be a good idea, but . . . unfortunately, the RA [residence advisor] that*

*was in charge of the quiet floor . . . she wasn't really that interested in being an RA she just mostly did it to look good. I mean . . . you can take four or five courses to be a full time student, but one of the semesters that she was an RA she decided to take six because she wanted to participate in an exchange. So I mean, I don't think being an RA was that important to her and it could really . . . you could really see it in the community on our floor. Umm, other floors were really . . . they got along well and they did stuff with the RAs or with the other students on the floor, but my floor . . . it was sort of like left on its own.*

The fact that Maria felt that her residence advisor (RA) was doing the job only because there was something in it for her, prevented her from trying to establish any real kinship or community sense with the students on her floor. Despite the lack of effort from her RA though, Maria did make some good friends immediately. However, issues developed among them quickly as well. She stated:

*I made some friends right away. . . . I felt like I was the most mature . . . but I still made friends but . . . I can't remember what the initial issue was with the one of the girls, but . . . I got into an argument with—with her and then it just so happened that my other friends that were friends with her as well, decided that they were just going to take her side and at this point, since I was still pretty new in [name of city], it wasn't even a month yet . . . it didn't really bother me, I just made other friends and my other friends that I made on the same floor . . . they felt like the friends I made initially they were immature, and . . . but there was like, still drama between my new friends and my old friends so we brought it up to the RA and . . . she took the other girl's side and actually, the RA, she made . . . she made it like, sort of like a mission to exclude me and my new friends out of activities.*

While initially Maria thought she made a good, supportive group of friends on campus, she came to realize that her original group of friends did not fully accept or understand her which caused a large argument that strained the group dynamic. She went on to describe one situation in particular which really impacted her:

*So for instance . . . one time . . . we were studying for midterms cause first years take a lot of . . . [the]same classes. So, we were studying for midterms and then the RA . . . she asked everybody . . . when would be a good time to go out for sushi and . . . I didn't even like sushi but I was just going to go . . . just to be a part of the group but . . . me and my friends we were all part of the one psych class and then the night before our midterm, that's the night that she chose to go*

*and we just like, decided to cram that night . . . so we . . . felt like she strategically chose it to exclude us.*

Despite trying to be a part of the group by deciding to go to a restaurant whose food she did not eat, continued to exclude her and keep her out of the "dominant" group. This continued to form her negative opinion of her peers and the school as a whole.

Unfortunately, this was not the end of Maria's negative social experiences on campus. She continued:

*And actually at the end of that year . . . my two friends from that floor that I had . . . you know, been through the entire year and who were very supportive, they actually both transferred. . . . one transferred to [name of university] and then the other one transferred to [name of university] so . . . like, I feel like that really impacted my . . . outlook on the [name of university] and then my experience of like being a student living away from home because I felt really isolated like coming back the next year and the fact that they were moving to like, bigger schools with like, more organized res and everything. I felt like they were getting out of somewhere really bad and going to somewhere really good.*

Maria's description of the university as "somewhere really bad" is quite telling. From her comments, she clearly recognized that she was not a part of the dominant group in her residence hall and perhaps on campus in general. When the last of her really good friends moved to "somewhere really good," she perhaps felt that they have moved somewhere where they belonged and where they felt included by others, leaving her behind. These feelings of exclusion may be one of the reasons why so many women in this study did not want to disclose their disability to others on campus.

#### *Disclosure to Peers*

Despite the fact that many of the women interviewed for this study stated that peers interacted with them positively overall, half of the women in this study said that when it came to disclosing their disability to peers, they either rarely disclosed that they had a disability, only did so if people asked them directly, or only disclosed to their close

friends. Maria for instance, only disclosed to close friends because of the fear she has that others will think her grades are not a reflection of her true abilities in the class, but rather because of the accommodations she was being provided:

*Uh, no. I would say only my close friends know about that . . . OK so for instance [I have chosen not to share that because] . . . the people this semester in that class where they're like, "Oh, you're that girl that the prof . . . only knows the name of" and stuff, I feel like if they found out that . . . you know, if someday I can't meet a deadline I can sort of ask her for a couple extra days, I feel like they'll be like, "Whoa, you got a higher mark in that class because you got an extension" but to me, even though like, it does help me . . . it's like we have the same—even though I got a couple extra days, in my eyes it's like the exact same opportunity because they don't know how hard it had been for me, and then they'll argue, "Well . . . I've been busy" or "I just broke up with my boyfriend, I was sad." Well, it's like, they have no idea. So, I feel like they just wouldn't understand what it's like . . . for me to be a student. So . . . I just like . . . I don't know I guess I just, I just fake it . . . and then hope that . . . it works out for me . . . I guess.*

Similarly, Kelly also shared that as a woman in the military, many of her peers look up to her because they view her as someone that is working toward a degree, and they are inspired by her and the work she is doing. However, she shared the same fears as Maria: that her peers would believe that her success and aptitude were no longer a result of her intelligence. She stated:

*Very few [of my peers know]. . . . Very, very few. . . . Because then I think it would justify [pause] my aptitude in their eyes. If that makes any sense, I don't think it does. . . . [slight pause] for those who do look up to me . . . it won't give them hope anymore. They won't . . . attribute my success to my achievements of being—having . . . two degrees to [slight pause] effort anymore, or intellect, cause I'm trying to express constantly that it's not so much intellect, it's more effort, and I can't really prove that now . . . because it makes me a hypocrite. . . . [They would attribute my success to] Nothing [if I told them]. They would go right back to where they believe they can't do it. . . . And that would suck.*

These participants may perhaps, "choose not to self-disclose out of fear and avoidance" (Olney & Brockelman, 2005, p. 81) because they had come to understand that while their peers and members of faculty can identify the names of disabilities, they still do not have

an understanding of what life is like with the challenges of these disabilities (Erten, 2011).

In addition to the fear of losing the positive perceptions people have of them prior to disclosure, the "lack of understanding" that people have about disabilities (Mullins & Preyde, 2013, p. 154; see also, Erten, 2011) has also impacted the women in this study in regards to disclosing their disability to their peers. Michelle for instance, shared her opinion about her choice to rarely disclose to others:

*Yeah, so I'm . . . not necessarily forthcoming about it . . . in university. Umm, and I don't know why. I like, I don't volunteer that information I guess because it's just so embedded into my life that I don't think about it as something that I have to share. . . . If people ask me about it like, yeah, I'm . . . all opening—all open to explanation or whatever and . . . actually one of my friends didn't realize that I wrote exams in Disability Services and today she was like, "Where are you, the exam's starting!" and I was like, "Oh, yes exactly" [light laughter], so . . . in a situation like that it's OK because she's there—she cares enough to try to get in contact me [sic] if an exam is starting . . . so when I told her the answer she's kinda like, "Oh! That makes sense I haven't seen you at any exams". . . . people who I grew up with, it's just always been a thing. . . . So nobody really like, talks about it. . . . I don't know. . . . It's not in the foreground of my life. . . . It's sort of in the background.*

Further, when asked how it would make it feel if the fact that she had a learning challenge became a part of the conversation, Michelle noted the comments directed toward her with respect to her level of intelligence that are meant to be a "compliment":

*It would probably make me uncomfortable [disclosing to peers] . . . but I don't think it would necessarily be awful. . . . like people have said like, [sarcastic tone] "But, you don't have a disability, like, you're too smart to have a disability!" or like, [sarcastic tone] "But you're so smart!" is something I hear a lot and again, they think it's a compliment but, it's just like [breathes out] OK. . . . Well [that makes me uncomfortable], cause the comment is kind of, rude [laughter]. . . . they have the best intentions I realize that but it's sort of rude . . . and it just really speaks to like, the level of ignorance that people have towards people with disabilities. . . . yeah and just not having that conversation I guess like, [sarcastic tone] "Yes, I write in Disability Services, yes I have this." It's just exhausting . . . [laughter].*

Michelle's comments mirror those discussed by other researchers. According to Trammell (2009), "disability has often been a metaphorical red shirt, a type of intentionally or unintentionally bestowed label that immediately creates otherness" (p. 22). This of course, all too often creates a blemish on those who have disabilities, causing them to wear this "metaphorical red shirt" (Trammell, 2009, p. 22).

In addition to the eight women who stated that they rarely disclosed, another roughly 19% of the participants stated that disclosure to peers happened over a period of time as they got to know the person better and as the friendship developed. This is not unusual, as Olney and Brockelman (2005) found that when presenting themselves to others, women with both visible and invisible disabilities wanted to "control information about their disability" (p. 86), and did so by trying to make up for, and minimize, their disability. Joy for instance, noted:

*Yeah . . . most times I do. . . . it's usually like a slow to warm thing. . . . Like, if someone ever wanted me to write something I'd say like, "No" but then if they were like, a good enough friend I'd pull to a side later and be like, "Dude, I got the learning disability thing, like, don't do it." . . . most of my peers know, like my housemates all know . . . but it's not something that like, they even think twice about. Like, do you know what I mean? . . . it's not something held against me . . . I guess was the way to look at it. They don't even, you know, I'm just kinda [name] . . . not [name] with a learning disability. . . . I think that has to do like, [slight pause] I don't have a—you can't see the disability on me, do you know what I mean? I think that kinda comes to the difference. You can't see it and you can't hear it. . . . So your senses are telling you that I'm just the same as everyone else.*

Of course, for a person with a disability that is easily noticed right away, such as an uncommon twitch or gait for example, "disclosing one's disability early was essential" (2005, p. 86). Further, Mullins and Preyde (2013) stated that many of the participants in their study felt that disclosing to others will only happen out of necessity, or may also happen with those people with whom they feel that are in a close relationship (see also



Bernard-Brak et al., 2010). For Joy, being treated "the same as everyone else" was something very important to her and perhaps one of the main reasons why she did not disclose to people she did not know very well. She felt almost comfortable in the fact that she can hide her disability from the world if she chose to, a choice that those with visible disabilities do not have.

Brooke for example, discussed how she disclosed only to those friends that she felt closest to, like her roommates. She stated:

*Not all of them know . . . because you know, I just don't feel that close to them . . . but the ones that I live with and the ones that I feel like need to know, because when I'm not going to the same room as them for an exam they're gonna figure it out. Umm, but the ones I live with . . . my best friends know because I think it's important for them to know that I can't study with them because I'm not just being a jerk to them . . . because I actually have to do this on my own. And I find it now, at this level of education, they appreciate me more . . . and like, the profs generally do. They kinda go, "Oh, wow!" like, "No way! I would never have known." . . . I was just walking with one of my friends on the street and I kind of told her about it and she was like, "Oh my goodness I would never have known" . . . and I always laugh at that cause like, "Well, how can you know?" like . . . whatever.*

Despite the fact that Brooke felt more appreciated at this level of her educational career by her professors, she still wanted to control the narrative about her disability. She also noted for example, that part of the reason why she shared with her roommates is because "they're gonna figure it out" if she takes tests in another room. Therefore, in an effort to control what they know about her and her disability, she disclosed to them. Perhaps this effort to control the narrative is due, in part, to a particularly upsetting situation for her when she did decide to disclose her disability to a friend in high school, and her boyfriend. She explained:

*I don't . . . tell it to my regular friends because I . . . told my boyfriend at the time now, when we just met I told him about it . . . and he's like, "Oh, read this" . . . and I was like, "Oh . . ." I was like, "I can . . ." it was just like . . . in grade **nine** I told a girl on . . . my softball team who I was friends with, I had told her that . . .*

*I struggle with reading and stuff and she goes, “Read that sign” [points with her finger] and I’m like . . . “I can read!” I’m like, “What do you mean?” and then I just don’t wanna read it cause they’re saying like, “Oh, read that!” and I’m like, “I can **read** like, I just do it differently” and . . . so that . . . kind of gave me fear of being too open with it because—and I’ve gotten before, “Oh that’s weird” and then we just moved on and I was like, “**Mm hmm** . . . that is weird.”*

To finally trust people enough, especially a friend and a significant other, and then to have them ask her to read things for them, was clearly not the reaction she wanted or was expecting. She became a sort of spectacle, a kind of circus animal that they could have perform tricks for them, just to laugh when she falters. She continued:

*[It makes me feel] **Awful** [when someone says that] . . . I hate it and it’s the worst feeling and I got so mad at him and I was like, “I’m not stupid.” Like, it’s . . . the biggest thing. I’m not **stupid**. I . . . am smarter than you [laughter] like, that’s what I got like and I was like, “How dare you say that to me” [laughter] like, “I am just as smart as you, you read it, and then I’ll read it!” and then it’s like—and then I s—I’m gonna read it and I’m like, “I just don’t wanna have to prove that I could read the word ‘pizza’ to you . . . like, we’re at Boston Pizza, I can read ‘Boston Pizza’ like, I’m not . . . ”*

These instances were perhaps particularly poignant events in Brooke's life as they showed her that disclosure, even to those who mean the most to her, may leave her vulnerable, stigmatized, and judged. She added:

*[It comes from] Ignorance. . . . he got upset that I got so upset. He’s like, “I had no idea that would upset you, blah, blah, blah” [sic] and I’m like, “You know, it’s not your fault. You have no idea.” . . . and I forgave him eventually obviously, but it’s like—I . . . feel like I couldn’t get mad at him for it, although it made me feel be—**out of this world** . . . I . . . couldn’t get mad cause what does he know? That was his way of saying, “Oh wow, can you read?” . . . people don’t understand . . . that it’s not like that . . . and that’s not the way it is, but that’s just ignorance. There was a time when people would talk about depression, it’d be like, “Oh my gosh . . . you’re not crying though” like, it’s like, it’s just a thing where it’s like, they just don’t understand . . . my LD or LDs . . . anyone with an LD can read Boston Pizza . . . like, we’re not like, come on [laughter]. . . . Like, one of the signs literally said something that was one word and I was like, “I can read a word!” [laughter] . . . so it made me feel awful but then it’s like, they just don’t know. That was their way of trying to learn.*

Brooke's recognition of not just the ignorance in her boyfriend, but the ignorance of *society* toward learning disabilities is important. She realizes that while her boyfriend did not mean anything truly harmful by what he said, it is his as well as other nondisabled people's understandings of what disability is, that is the real problem. She went on to say:

*It was rude, but they didn't know how rude it was . . . like, his face looked fine until I was like, "How dare you" . . . like, what is that? Like, are you kidding me?" . . . And that's when he was like backpedaling and, "Oh no, no, I didn't mean it" . . . but it's like, what is that? . . . Right? They're just—it's ignorance. They just don't know and that's why I think it's so importance to kind of talk about it with them after and be like, "This is what it is" and like . . . those things. . . . they know that I can read a **sign** . . . right? So, I think it's just ignorance that leads them to say things like that and you're just like, "I can't deal with you."*

Certainly, negative experiences when they do decide to disclose like the one Brooke discussed, may be a big reason for why disclosure happens so rarely for these women. Even when they share their disability with someone they trust, who is supposed to love and support them at all costs, they run the risk of being judged, hurt emotionally, or laughed at, whether the comments are intentional or not.

Interestingly, however, while only 30% of the women interviewed in this study believed their social interactions were negative, fifteen out of the sixteen participants described at least one negative social interaction where they encountered judgment, stigma, jealousy, comments regarding the unfairness of extra accommodations given, and non-belief. Notably, comments that reflected doubt, jealousy and comments regarding the unfairness of extra accommodations were only directed toward those with learning challenges. This is not surprising, as feelings like these are often directed toward those with invisible disabilities (Bielke & Yssel, 1999; Mullins & Preyde, 2013; Olney & Brockelman, 2005). Adelaide, for example, stated:

*Only negative in the way of doubt[when I've disclosed to friends and peers]. . . . A lot of people doubted that I had ADHD, even like, my best friends. Like,*

*“Don’t you think maybe if you just tried harder?” . . . It’s like, oh God [laughter]. . . . [I feel] frustration [when someone says that], but then . . . I understand because that’s how I used to view it. Well, I used to think it was maybe just being a little dramatic . . . over-diagnosed, like most people do. And all it is is just . . . education. So just show the people the right information. . . . And that’s all you can do.*

It is unfortunate that for Adelaide, even her best friends questioned whether or not she truly had a disability, or whether it was just a matter of putting in the extra effort. People with invisible disabilities though, often express feeling doubt from those around them who "didn't believe them to have a disability" (Olney & Brockelman, 2005, p. 86).

In addition, the authors found that those with invisible disabilities "said they felt blamed for their disabling conditions, and that people had trouble seeing them as simultaneously disabled and capable" (2005, p. 86). Michelle, for example, noted:

*Yes, [when I disclose] to friends [I feel that they don't necessarily believe me] all the time. . . . there is always disbelief. Uh, professors I don’t think I’ve ever gotten that impression before. . . . but definitely from friends and from, oh yeah just from friends I’d say. . . . People who are just like, “No you don’t, no you don’t” . . . and again, it’s that . . . reoccurring theme that I keep talking about but . . . yeah. . . . [I think they don't believe me] Because they don’t see me as somebody who could be impaired I guess. Like I—I like school, I like to participate in class . . . I do well in school you know, people come to me . . . if they have questions. Umm, not to sound braggy but . . . they do. Umm, and so for them to learn that this person who they’ve been like asking for help and have been seeking out actively, actually has something like, **wrong** with them or you know, some sort of impairment . . . changes their schema . . . of me a bit.*

Michelle recognized that she does well in school: she is by her own definition and academic standards, successful. The experience of a person with an invisible disability therefore, "falls in the misunderstood gap between the dominant disability paradigms, the medical model and the social model" (Valeras, 2010, para.22) where the person is still viewed as something that needs fixing and constructed as a problem, but that the ableist attitudes of society also need fixing (Valeras, 2010). These types of comments directed to Adelaide and Michelle from those closest to them in their lives, those who are supposed

to continually be supportive of them, may have also impacted their own overall view of themselves.

Comments regarding the unfairness of accommodations were directed toward some of the women in this study. Jenn for example, discussed how she had been previously told that other students are jealous of the accommodations she receives, like extra time on exams, because having some extra time would be beneficial for them also.

She stated:

*I've had people who often say that their jealous that I have ADD and that I can . . . I get the extra time and stuff because of that. . . . they were wanting the extra time, but they don't have a disability so they couldn't—they didn't have access to it. . . . Oh, I . . . thought it was kinda funny but I was also feeling that maybe if other people are saying that the professors might not be giving us enough time . . . for tests and stuff if they're . . . if that's what they're saying. . . . Well it sounded kinda like they were joking . . . but, I don't know, I . . . when they said it I told them that really you shouldn't be jealous of . . . having a . . . disability like this . . . it's not fun . . . [light laughter]. . . . I don't really remember if they said anything after that . . . but . . .*

This concept of unfairness regarding accommodations is an interesting one. Despite the fact that accommodations are put into place to create equity by giving students with disabilities ". . . the same advantages and opportunities at work as those without disabilities" (Paetzold, Garcia, Colella, Ren, del Carmen Triana, & Ziebro, 2008, p. 27) people do not view it in this way. Marie, for example, noted:

*I think I'm treated fairly. Umm, well one time one of the students thought it wasn't fair that I gotten [sic] time and a half . . . for my exams. Umm, so I guess in that case they didn't think I got treated fair to them like . . . like, they thought it was a bonus for me to get time a half. . . . I didn't really like that. . . . cause it's not that I always **need** that time and a half, it's just **knowing** it's there. . . . So I don't have to rush. . . . And like, I don't worry about not being able to finish. . . . Cause like, thinking about not being able to finish will make me like, not really read the question. . . . So like, I could mess stuff up. . . . I don't really know [why he felt he had to tell me it wasn't fair] cause . . . it was someone I went to high school with. Umm, I said like, we had an exam coming up, and I said I had to go walk to main campus . . . to write in Disability Services. And they were like, "well, what do you do that for?" and then they asked, like, I used to be friends with him in*

*high school, so I just explained, and then he said, "Oh, well that's not fair that you get time and a half" . . . and it was just like, [pause] yeah I don't know.*

These types of comments made to Adelaide and Marie demonstrate the ableist assumptions that still exist within society. Mainly, the belief that those with disabilities are getting some kind of advantage over the *normal*, able-bodied student, rather than the understanding from others that those with disabilities, through accommodations, can now have the same, equal opportunity to succeed as any other student on campus.

Additionally, women in this study also noted social interactions with others that resulted in their feeling judged and stigmatized by them. Natalie, for example, felt that much of this stigma and judgment came from the fact that she does not have anything physical to show others. She noted:

*Oh, so more specifically . . . [I mean there are invisible barriers like] Judgement . . . when you have ADD . . . The second you—like, I . . . kid around with it with my friends and things like that but then, it's almost like . . . contagious. It's like, "Oh yeah I forget things too." Really? Does it rule your life? . . . Does it really interfere with things? . . . and it's almost like lacking the ability to have something physical to show . . . Like, "Oh hey, here's my ADD [points to her elbow]" . . . and . . . have that validated. And it felt like without . . . proper documentation it was almost like I was naked. I was coming forward with all of this, you know, "I have this. I have all these documentations", and it wasn't enough. It was as if saying that my disability, what I experience . . . wasn't enough.*

According to Charmaz and Rosenfeld (2006), the body itself is treated "as a comparative and normative looking glass, separated from self and situation" (p. 39) and therefore, these comparisons and normative standards that others take for granted "result[s] in unitary judgments imposed upon ill and disabled individuals" (p. 39). These beliefs of course, may be why Natalie and so many postsecondary students in Olney and Brockelman's (2003) study "tried to keep their disabled identity a secret" (p. 46): they wanted to be seen as competent individuals, rather than people who lie and complain.

They did not want to be stereotyped and they want to have the same opportunities both socially and academically that other students do (Olney & Brockelman, 2003).

Michapentimento also felt that there a stigma on campus toward those with learning challenges. She stated:

*I think so [that there is a stigma on campus toward people who have learning disabilities]. . . . something that's difficult for me is . . . I like to find my own note-takers . . . at the beginning of . . . my education here . . . I used to like Powerpoints . . . and then the . . . students to just add the notes to the Powerpoints but now I like . . . students to do their notes on documents, like, take the Powerpoints, add 'em to the documents and stuff. So like, I always sit at the back of the classroom. . . . Mainly because I don't like anybody behind me. Just, I mean . . . if I'm gonna be on Facebook or whatever . . . [laughter] . . . but I just don't like people behind me and . . . also from the back of the classroom I can also see what everybody else is doing, and I can also see who looks like they're typing a lot, and I can pick who I want to be . . . my note-taker.*

While it is often the case that the professor of the class finds note-takers for the students who need it, she instead takes a proactive approach. However, in her opinion, when she needs to ask for a note-taker (as per her accommodations), she worries that people will think she is slacking off and can do it for herself. She went on to say:

*But . . . with doing that it's always a little funky for me to ask, "Hey, can you be my note-taker?" I never say, I have a d—people just know. Uh, when you're asking them to be a note-taker, like . . . you don't even need to say like, "Hey . . . I have a learning disability, I'm registered with SDS" . . . just need to say like, "Hey, I need a note-taker for this class, would you . . . mind? I'd really appreciate it". . . you don't even need to go into great detail unless . . . like, they need you to . . . but sometimes I feel like . . . they're thinking in their head like, I don't know, "So, why does she need a note-taker? What's . . . so wrong with her?" Like, you know? . . . "What's she doing now in class like, while I'm taking her notes so what's she doing?" . . . Like, "Why . . . while I'm doing this, like, I mean she's doing something on her computer right now . . . so, is she listening or . . . ?" I don't know, sometimes it's just a thought that kinda goes . . . goes through my head.*

Michapentimento sheds light on an interesting paradox. Even though she has a disability which is invisible to others, she felt that her disability is immediately obvious to anyone she asks to be a note-taker for her. However, even though she believed this to be obvious,

she also felt that the disability is not obvious *enough* as others may question why she cannot take the notes for herself, or believe that she is just being lazy.

Interestingly, in contrast to Michapentimento and Natalie and in regards to social interactions that result in stigmatization, Amélie felt that a stigma on campus exists toward those with physical disabilities, which is why in her social encounters with others she is careful not to bring it up:

*They [my peers] do not even know that I have physical disability [sic]. . . . Yeah, cause if they knew, they would treat me differently. There is a very big stigma with physical disabled people and they would not treat me the same. They would treat me as differently and I'm not even—not be considered their friend but . . . I can be distant from them. . . . Yeah, [I don't tell too many people on campus because] I do not want that stigma and I don't want [inaudible] that attention, I don't want for them to be consider me as different . . . because if people knew, like, their treatment with me would be completely different. . . . That's what I can say.*

Amélie certainly recognized "disability as a problem in the environment rather than in [herself]" (Olney & Brockelman, 2003, p. 39), which has caused her to avoid situations with other able-bodied individuals that may result in negative feelings and stigmas directed toward her.

It is very clear through the reflections of the women in this study, that ableist beliefs and assumptions are still occurring within the postsecondary environment through various social interactions and encounters. This is unfortunate, as it seems that for those who are not considered *normal* by societal standards, have to constantly fight for their place within the postsecondary environment against a multitude of negative comments that reflect the ingrained belief that this environment is made only for the normative elite. One of the ways in which some participants in this study rallied against these ableist practices was through their attempts to educate others about disability.



*Educating Others About Disabilities*

While stigma, judgment, non-belief, and doubt were sometimes a part of their social lives, many of the women in this study felt it was important to educate others about their disability in order to help them understand their experiences and actively stand up for themselves. Perhaps this education also occurred to bridge the gap in understanding that exists about students with disabilities in general (Garrison-Wade, 2012). This may be due to the fact that faculty and others in teaching positions still "do not include disability-related topics in the classroom through discussions or classroom activities" as many feel they are "not relevant to their class" (Bruder & Mogro-Wilson, 2010, p. 10).

In fact, half of the women interviewed in this study, all of them with learning challenges, described instances and situations where they encountered these negative perceptions and comments from others and often met them with an educational, intelligent, and proactive response. Melanie for example, stated that she liked to educate others because many people do not understand what having a learning challenge really means. In some cases, she is surprised about what people's opinions have been of her and add to her opinion that they are clearly misinformed. She stated:

*I usually kind of end up disclosing when people ask why I wasn't at an exam . . . and I don't mind doing it, I actually kinda like it cause I think there are a lot of misconceptions and I like correcting them, I like trying to educate people a bit . . . and I've found a lot of my friends and acquaintances and just people I meet, don't really know a lot about disabilities . . . so sometimes initially, it's kind of, you know, makes me a little bit upset because it's like, well I didn't know you thought **that** about me without knowing that you were thinking it about me . . . you know what I mean? . . . like I've gotten a lot of people say stuff like, "Well, you get extras. You did well on the exam, you did better than me because you get **extras**."*

It is interesting that Melanie's peers do not believe she did better than them on an exam because she may be more intelligent, but rather her success is contributed to the

accommodations she receives. Yet when she was confronted with these negative comments, she often explained to people why that is not the case. She went on to say:

*That really bugs me. . . . But I think most people get it once I explain it to them . . . . Once I explain that they're not really extra things that I'm getting it's just so that I can process things the way they are or whatever . . . . at first it makes me kind of upset and it kinda makes me feel a little bit—I think it makes me doubt my ability a little bit. . . . Just sort of temporarily . . . maybe, and then I have to do the same thing that I do when profs have that attitude where I remind myself that I'm smart and you know, that I'm here because I got in because I'm smart and I have to do that whole thing . . . again. And then . . . usually I explain it and for people who don't wanna listen to me I kind of figure it's their loss . . . and people who do listen usually seem to get it . . . so then it ends up being a lot better.*

Melanie's comments clearly reflect a sense of the ableist hegemony occurring in her undergraduate experiences. Despite Melanie's attempts to educate others about the fact that having a disability does not mean you are *less than* someone else, she still encounters some self-doubt as a result of their comments to her. However, she continues to press on and empower herself by constant reminders that she is intelligent and that she earned her place on campus.

While in most cases the participants felt it was important to teach others and attribute their comments to a lack of understanding on the subject, some did so out of frustration or anger at the presence of ignorance shown, which often resulted in comments from the women that mirrored these feelings. For instance, when Joy was met with surprise and disbelief from others that she had a learning challenge because she is successful in school, she shut down the conversation immediately:

*People are usually shocked [when they find out I have a disability] cause they're like, "Oh, but you do so well in school." And I . . . usually curse and be like, "That has **nothing** to do with it. I also have to dedicate three times the amount of time you do, so, stop."*

Michelle as well, described a situation with a teaching assistant she had in one of her classes:

*Somebody [light laughter]—a TA once told me that I don't look like somebody with a learning disability. And that was just the silliest thing I'd ever heard . . . Well, I—I said something kinda mouthy. Like, I probably wouldn't have done this if it was a prof but they were a TA and they were kinda closer to my age . . . and I said, [sarcastic tone] “Well you know, I left my learning disability wheelchair at home so you probably didn't pick up on it” and they were just like, “Oh, yeah.”*

Further, when Brooke described a situation where both her and Joy encountered a particularly mean-spirited person, she stated how she confronted the individual and proceeded to argue with them, trying to get the person to understand her experiences as a person with a learning challenge:

*Not really me but . . . my sister had this from someone . . . and kind lumped us together. He said it to the both of us . . . and to my mom, made a comment that his taxes are paying—cause we get a computer with Kurzweil on it and stuff so that we can read our textbooks at home. . . . It reads to us at home so that I don't have to like you know, read this textbook. It takes you whatever time to read a textbook, it takes me twice as long to read this textbook . . . to understand it, right? . . . So that kind of saves me from having to read it three times because, who has time to read a textbook three times? I'm in seven courses this semester I have **no** time for that . . . so this way I can go through it slowly with it and I get it. And he made a comment that . . . his parents' taxes pay for . . . our . . . unnecessary . . . technologies.*

The man that confronted Brooke and her family is someone who clearly does not understand what it means to have learning challenges. His blatant disregard for their feelings on the matter only prove this further. Clearly, this is a person that maintains ableism and ableist practices well. If *he* does not see the value in assistive technologies, he is wasting his taxpayer money on something that people do not need. Brooke went on to say:

*I was like, “Unnecessary techn—you're like, are you kidding me?”. . . It was just like . . . “Mmm, no. Like, if you wanna be me for a day like, you'd see how much I . . . ” It's like the glasses thing I said . . . like, it's just a pair of glasses. Like, what's the big deal? . . . I'm so—like, are you **jealous**? Like, are you **mad**? Like, I didn't do anything . . . I've been struggling my whole childhood to get these things so I feel better now and you're gonna tell me I don't need them?. . . I just . . .*

*. dismiss it now. I'm just like, "OK, [hits hands on table] that's fine . . . you live your life, I'll live mine, I don't need to deal with you."*

Brooke made a valiant attempt to get the person to understand her daily struggle by giving him a clear analogy of what her experience is like, but it falls on deaf ears.

Seemingly though, these attempts to educate others happen so often that she simply feels she cannot do it anymore. She added:

*I usually will try and fight it and be like, "Well, I can't do this, I can't do that, I struggle with this, I struggle with that, do you have any idea what it's like to read the textbook three times?" and . . . they still don't get it . . . generally, when they have . . . such a strong opinion that they'd say that to me to my face off the bat it's like, there's really no swaying them. I've started giving up. . . . When I hear it I'm just kinda like, ". . . You have your opinion . . . I can't." Like, it's like, there's nothing I can do, anymore. I . . . fight with them for a little bit and they're like, "I don't believe it, I don't know, like, you can read fine." It's like, "Well you don't understand obviously . . . so there's no point like . . ."*

Despite her continued efforts, Brooke has unfortunately resigned herself to the fact that if people do not really want to change their beliefs about disability, they will not. She no longer sees the point in fighting with people who are already firmly set in their ways. If people do not believe that learning challenges are a real thing, Brooke believes that nothing will change them. She continued:

*It happens a lot and it just . . . because the type of person that comes to me with such a strong stance I've just decided that I haven't changed one mind about it yet. When people are open-minded, they're like, "Oh, I wanna know", I change their minds a hundred percent . . . cause I tell them about it and they respect me and they start respecting LDs and all these things but when someone is so ignorant to off the bat say, "I don't believe you" I just think like, "What can I say to you?". . . I say all those things, you're still not budging and I'm like, "You know what? You're just wasting my breath now . . . I can go read this textbook now, like, I don't need to talk to you anymore." It's just . . . because many people who have that opinion are just . . . so **strong** on it . . . you fight it for so long and you just—you're like, "I can't anymore. I—obviously you can't be me, you don't know me so, it's not working." But it does—it happens a lot more than I'd want it to especially at my age now, you'd think it'd be done, but this person—these people who are saying these things are fully grown . . . and it's like, you know . . . hard to change opinions like that sometimes.*

Unlike those whose opinions she felt she cannot change, it was the people who are really willing to listen and learn who may be more receptive to what she has to say.

Unfortunately, society's lack of acceptance of her and her disability have left her tired and jaded.

Disability, perhaps particularly within the ivory towers of the postsecondary system, is often labeled as "misfortune" (Devlin & Pothier, 2006, p. 10). This may be due perhaps to societal views of universities as elite in nature, hosting the upper echelon of society. This misfortune is often written into the university policies themselves that still structure disability as a "limitation" or an "incapacity" (Hibbs & Pothier, 2006, p. 204). Having this perspective, according to Devlin & Pothier (2006), "is to buy into a framework of charity and pity rather than equality and inclusion" (p. 10), which is perhaps why so many of these women feel it necessary to educate others. They want to show that they belong, and that they are deserving of basic human rights: to be included and considered equal.

### **Women and Disability on Campus**

#### *Inclusive Campus*

One of the ways in which the women in this study shared their personal opinions and experiences was through discussions about the inclusivity of their respective postsecondary institution. The concept of what it means to be *included* is an important one to note. Many people perhaps would define what it means to be included, at its foundational level, as truly feeling like they *belong*. Summarily, that they were wanted, welcomed, and treated fairly and equitably by all.

Unfortunately though, when asked the question as to whether or not they believed that their campus was an inclusive and welcoming one, the women in this study were

truly divided. Encouragingly, however, 56% of the participants believed that the campus was an inclusive one. Anne for instance, speaking from her own experience as an international student with a disability stated:

*I absolutely agree. . . . I would say in terms of people with disabilities or people like . . . from different ethnic groups people are really, really friendly . . . really, really welcoming with that. . . . Like . . . as far as I know . . . [name of university] is actually . . . has the most international student portion in Canada. . . . And . . . disability service went pretty well so far.*

Marie as well, added:

*I would agree. . . . Also, cause I have something to compare it to. . . . Like, in compared to [name of university]. . . . I don't know, I find [name of former university] seems to be more I guess, competitive. . . . And everyone, well not everyone, I can't say everyone, but a lot of the students care most about like, themselves. And . . . the profs here seem more welcoming. . . . and the profs here will just like, like they can just like talk to you about anything. . . . the ones at [name of former university] I felt like I couldn't just go and talk to.*

Both Marie and Anne mentioned that they felt included and welcomed into their university campuses because of the people within it. Both women for example, noted that they felt a genuine sense of caring and friendliness from other toward them.

Interestingly, following this logic, both Brooke and Marie used comparisons to past events when discussing their beliefs about inclusion in their postsecondary school experiences. While Marie for example, discussed her experiences at her current university to those at another university in Ontario before she transferred, Brooke compared her past schooling experiences in both elementary and secondary school to her current postsecondary ones which have made her feel much more included:

*I would agree. . . . I would agree, yeah. I've had **no** problems . . . feeling included. I've felt included from campus activities, frosh weeks and things like that are in—and other activities and my clubs that . . . [name of university] has put me in . . . my friends are inclusive, but the school brought me to them . . . so . . . even with the special education or Student Success that they call it here and stuff, it's like I don't feel—I feel better. I feel more included here than I did in*

*elementary school and high school. It's a little bit slow sometimes . . .but it's not discluding [sic] . . . I feel fine . . . yeah, hundred percent.*

It is interesting to note that these women "feel better" than they did in the past regarding inclusive schooling environments. I say this because even though they feel the environment is one that treats them well and makes them feel like they truly belong, they are currently part of an environment that not only *removes* the student with the disability away from their classmates during exams to write in a "special room," but also actively seeks to uncover those with disabilities through disclosure processes that make them " 'extravisable' in a negative way" (Goode, 2007, p. 42). It is true that students with disabilities do not have to write their exams in a different room if they don't want to, but it really is not a choice at all. If they want to receive the accommodations they require for an equitable university experience, they must actively remove themselves from other nondisabled students. It would seem though, in thinking about their past experiences, that these do not impact the inclusivity of the school in any real negative way.

However, while Michapentimento believed that the campus was an inclusive one, she alluded to the fact that this may be true for her in her experience because her disability is not visible to others:

*I'm sure all places everywhere—not everywhere, but most places everywhere aim to be an inclusive environment for everyone, but like, I think in all places there's gonna be some discrimination . . . and some stereotypes like, with the individuals . . . like, in those places whether it be—again, it's people with disabilities, or people from different countries . . . or foreign exchange students . . . or stuff so it's not just limited to people with disabilities. . . . it's with all people. And it's not just from . . . the higher-ups who run this place it's from the students within. . . . I've never really experienced people discriminating against me too much but like I said, I'm . . . you can't really see what I've . . . got going too much.*

According to Goode (2007), for the students with more visible disabilities, like some of the women in this study for example, this visibility may be automatic, simply structured

by the environment in which they are a part. For instance, many students with physical disabilities have to sit at the front of the classroom, making them highly noticeable to everyone in the class (Goode, 2007; see also, Zitzelsberger, 2005). Naturally then, perhaps this increased visibility by others leaves them more open to feelings of judgment and stigma than they would have been previously.

Furthermore, despite the fact that just over half of the participants believed the campus was inclusive, 44% of the women in this study did not feel that was the case. Five of these were women with learning challenges, as well as two of the three participants with physical disabilities. In fact, not only did the women adamantly deny this claim, many of them began their responses with bouts of laughter. Anna for instance, said:

*[laughter] Umm, [laughter] I'd say you're probably wrong. . . . [coughs] there are definitely aspects that systemically exclude people, whether they intend to or not. . . . Like, trying to find a professor's office, especially if it happens to be in [name of campus building]. . . . there are so many places where the numbering system just jots around and because I have a learning challenge, they assume that there's nothing wrong with my legs, therefore there would be nothing wrong with my ability to find that office. . . . They don't see the **numbering** as a challenge to get there. . . . things like the policy for getting a hold of the professor if you have a question during an exam . . . I'm trying to think if there's anything else . . . [pause] the fact that a lot of classes . . . the information is based on textbook, whereas a lot of people with disabilities, the textbook is not going to be their most efficient method of learning.*

Similarly, Maria added:

*[laughter] Umm, well, I would say they have . . . beautiful advertising. I would say they have an incredible team because I have a lot of international friends and they would laugh at that too . . . [laughter] and . . . just looking at my older brother's experience at [name of former university] and then my other high school friends who went off to other universities . . . not [name of university that I am attending], like, I would say although their schools maybe don't have the best advertising team or PR team, I would say there it's the real deal. But I would say **here** it's just like a poster . . . and then you get here and it's empty. . . . That's what I think. . . . Absolutely not, not in any way . . . whatsoever [laughter]. Not in res. . . . Yeah, well OK, to start from my experience for instance, res I mean, that was an awful experience.*



While Maria thought that the university itself did a great job of hiding the truth by presenting a beautiful inclusive image to potential students, Anna described this truth as she knew it: that the university excludes in multiple ways. Further, this mention of policy and textbooks as being particularly exclusive for students with disabilities is critical. The use of language and discourse has been established previously as being one of the major ways that ableism is perpetuated and disseminated throughout society (Clinton & Higbee, 2011; Devlin & Pothier, 2006; Femia, 1975). This is unfortunate as the use of both language and discourse in class discussions for example, are exactly what institutions of higher education are all about. For both women, this is a point that they may be all too familiar with in their undergraduate experiences. Further, Maria also felt that the school did not recognize diversity as an advantage. She continued:

*And . . . OK so, even though it is very diverse there is a ton of racism . . . yeah, like I feel like being diverse, we should just use it as a strength but, it's not. Umm, there's a lot of racism in that sense and there's no . . . sense of school community, anything like that, like nobody's proud to be a [member of the university]. Umm, like there's no like, we sort of, everybody has their own cliques, nobody belongs to [name of university], nobody belongs to a club here. Everybody's just like, "Oh, like I'm here with you know, my Asian friends" or . . . [laughter] . . . I'm here with my whatever friends" like, I don't know I feel like . . . nobody comes out of their shell I guess from what I've seen. . . . Nobody's really involved in multiple stuff [sic]. Like, everybody's quiet, there's no community here. . . . Nobody's really proud to be here I think.*

The lack of community as well as her belief that racism permeated the campus, obviously impacted Maria's experiences greatly. Perhaps Maria's own struggles as a student trying to fit in on campus, allowed her to see more clearly the lack of inclusivity that exists. Her comment that "nobody comes out of their shell" again may illustrate to Maria that 'different' people do not have a real place on campus. Instead, they lie outside the margins of what is acceptable.

While Maria and Anna approached their answers to the inclusive questions with sarcastic laughter, Joy and Amélie's responses took a much harsher tone, perhaps due to their own personal feelings of frustration regarding the subject. Of note, Maria, Anna, and Joy all have learning challenges and Amélie has a self-identified physical disability which is more visible to the trained eye. Joy stated:

*I would say that was the biggest lie I've ever heard . . . that is absolutely garbage. . . Why? Our campus well . . . when we were looking at our campus I can go on a tyrant [sic] about this, we had the [name of] referendum last year, if you're Jewish, my goodness . . . you're a Palestinian, you're saying that you are getting called racist, Jewishes [sic] are being called racist, if you got a physical disability, I don't think all of our buildings are handicap friendly. . . I'm not one hundred percent sure, but I don't know. If you look at our law school, actually, there's only about two Black gentlemen in our whole law school, majority of them are White. . . So you're talking about an inclusive campus, you know, we only have one or two, three registered Aboriginal students. . . our own student union is discriminatory towards . . . students with the whole referendum. Student Disability Services makes it hard for you to you know, completely go out and get those services, so I would never say [name of school] is an inclusive school, it's actually the main reason why I'm leaving this campus. . . One hundred percent done with this school.*

Joy brought up many examples that illustrated her opinion that the university is not an inclusive place. These examples included a referendum held on campus which increased racial and cultural tension, and a very low percentage of Aboriginal peoples enrolled as students as well as a low percentage of people of racial minorities accepted into the law school. When it comes to other students with disabilities for example, especially those with physical disabilities, her anger and frustration for what they have to experience has impacted not only her decision to leave campus, but her family's decisions as well. She added:

*I'm never coming back here. And this is actually my family school where we **donate**. . . Which has changed how much we donate and where we donate it now. We now donate it in specific funds. . . It doesn't go to actually, any of the programs that my sister or I are even part of. . . I would never say this campus is inclusive or friendly. I don't ever see that bus going around which helps students*

*with physical disabilities get from point A to point B. . . . You know, I worked as an RA, I know one hundred percent that the [name of residence hall] elevator barely ever works. So if you lived in [name of residence hall] and had a physical disability, good luck. Umm, if you live in [another name of residence hall] and you wanna use the bathrooms there and you have a physical disability, those hallways are small. . . . I can't see how that's friendly. . . . they're dirty, you can slip and fall, so . . . No, I would never say this campus is physically or mentally inclusive. . . . Not one inclusive thing about it.*

Similarly, when asked about the inclusiveness of the campus Amélie added:

*False. . . . False. . . . Not true. . . . Not true at all. It is not welcoming and it's not like what it says it is because you know, it's one thing that they are with that for new students, but the other thing when you already there and you see the reality. It's not the—the grass is not the greener inside . . . it just, it just worse. Because for instance, like, I see that like, I apply for TA positions, they never pick me, they pick another person, you know? And I can see that it's different for me and also, when it comes to representation at the campus, they will never pick a person with—cause I know a few people who go to Disability Services, I know them, and they never who are representing the school it's always abled people who are representing the school. It's always people who are normal . . . who are blonde, or who are like, with blue eyes and I do not see it—it does truly represent school [sic]. Especially doesn't represent what's fact there's a lot of university international students [sic] and they basically are cash cows.*

It is true of course, that the opinions from both women are very strong ones. What is perhaps most common in their statements is the recognition of the "sameness" which is occurring during their postsecondary experiences. Namely, the recognition that those in power create environments where normative practices happen (Gleason, 1999), often automatically (Foucault, 1975/1995). Also implicit in the comments from both of these women is the realization of which things or *people* are of value. Amélie for example, was frustrated that the leadership positions on campus that she applies for are often given to someone who looks *normal* and therefore, seems to be what the university values, despite it not being representative of the entire student body.

The experience of an inclusive campus is, undoubtedly, not the same for the women in this study. While many felt that they were welcomed, treated well, and felt a

sense of belonging, others felt the complete opposite. However, it is quite clear that different understandings of power, particularly who has it and who does not, is at the very core of these opinions and beliefs. Further, as noted previously, achieving true hegemony requires consent (Femia, 1975/1995). Therefore, perhaps some of these women may be unknowingly "consenting" to the social norms of the postsecondary environment. In other cases, however, the barriers to an inclusive campus make these norms even more clear.

### *Barriers*

Perhaps one of the best ways that this concept of "value" is illustrated within their postsecondary experiences and environment is shown through the discussions regarding the women's personal experiences on campus with various structural barriers. These barriers were often perceived to be more of an issue for the women with physical disabilities in this study, which was often noted not only by the women with visible disabilities themselves, but also by a few of the women with invisible disabilities in this study as well.

All three women with self-identified physical disabilities for example, all noted specific structural barriers that they have had to face as a student attending their postsecondary institutions. Moreover, all of these women mentioned the winter season around campus being particularly difficult for them. Also, they noted the fact that elevators in many campus buildings often did not work or have open doors, and they sometimes experienced physical isolation in their classrooms because they usually had to sit at the very front of the room. Anne, for example stated:

*Speaking for people with visual impairment, I've noticed that a lot of rooms in many buildings don't have Braille on the door. . . . I don't really need Braille myself, but what about people who are totally blind? . . . And, I would say . . . the . . . [name of campus building] in general is not accessible at all and a lot of . . . offices are located in that building. . . . I would say is there any way to make it*

*more accessible for student with disabilities? I mean, both physical and cognitive. . . . Cause . . . my friend was like half joking, and if you have any type of disabilities you're gonna get very lost in [name of campus building]. . . . [laughter] I need have [sic] my friends to walk me to my . . . professor's office hour[s], like every time if I have to go. . . . It's so hard [to find]. Everything looks the same. . . . There's no way to memorize. . . . a person with visual impairment that I know was suggesting if we could move some of the professors' office in [name of campus building], I mean, yeah [name of campus building] is pretty accessible . . . for us. . . . in general it's good [other buildings and on campus in general], but . . . some of the stairs I think they should have those kind of yellow striped lines . . . to make it more like, accessible for people with visual impairment.*

Anna, a woman with a learning challenge, also mentioned her concerns with the numbering systems of particular rooms. However, similar to Anne's experience as well, various aspects of universal design are missing. In their discussions of the "philosophical challenges" Devlin and Pothier (2006, p. 13) stated that the largest obstacle in society for people with disabilities is that *normal* people, the people upon which the standard is based, do not want to change. Therefore, it is assumed, and often much more desirable that people with disabilities find a way to fit into the box that is the *normal* society, rather than the other way around.

This resistance to change by the normative population is perhaps best illustrated in this study by the lack of snow removal services on campus, which has directly affected all three of the women with visible disabilities. For example, in addition to the barriers she noted above, Anne discussed having a great deal of difficulty getting around campus during the winter:

*Oh, last—the winter last year was absolutely horrible . . . I had to leave maybe twenty minutes earlier to get to my class just in case. . . . Cause first, I had snow blind for sure. . . . like, now I'm legally blind . . . and when it's come to the heavy snow I was in, not really though, but I would say I was like totally blind. . . . to find my place really . . . depend on my memory. But . . . sidewalk was . . . like, covered with snow. . . . And I found that pretty hard last year actually. . . . No [the snow was not removed]. . . . in **some** area that's remove [sic], but . . . from my res to [name of campus building] I don't think so. The snow was on the sidewalk and*

*it's pretty difficult to walk on the sidewalk. . . . Yeah, just in case for falling down, let's leave early.*

Similarly, Rose added:

*Well, I have to say like, one of the reasons why I chose [name of university] was because the buildings are actually relatively close to each other . . . like, if I went to Western you're takin' a city bus . . . to get to the other side so that was one of the things that brought me here was the fact that everything is relatively close . . . . **But** you know, there's lots of days where elevators aren't working so I have to get up the stairs and that you know, unfortunately stops me . . . from, it just makes things more painful . . . and the walking between all the classes, like, I know you can't have music classes in the education building, but. . . . it's really frustrating especially when you get emails saying like, you know, "the [name of university library] elevators are . . . out of use" . . .*

As women with physical disabilities, both Anne and Rose were forced to work within the constraints of what the able-bodied society has given them. Rather than getting the snow removed in a timely manner from all sidewalks and walkways to make it *easier* for students with visible disabilities to get around on campus, Anne and Rose have to struggle to get to where they need to be. Further, Anne specifically, seems to have encountered hegemonic ableism within her environment and then internalized it (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Kumari-Campbell, 2008) by putting the onus on herself to make sure she leaves a full twenty minutes earlier than usual in order to make it to her classes on time. Rather than blaming the way the postsecondary setting and administrative policies have been structured, she makes the responsibility her own.

It is true that the women in this study faced barriers in changing philosophies in many areas in their postsecondary experiences. However, one specific structure on campus not only showed this issue even more clearly, but also demonstrated how the concepts of hegemony, normative processes and power may still be dominating postsecondary institutions. The basement room, as a few women in this study explained, is a very small room located in the basement of the library that is meant to serve the entire

disability community on campus and is operated via Student Disability Services. It is accessible by keycard access only and a few flights of stairs as, according to participants, the elevator rarely works. The room itself has a few computers, some with the capability to show large text, and various other modified resources. Unfortunately, even though all of the participants in the study were registered or in the process of registering to receive accommodations and services from the student disability office, only five of the women (roughly 31% of the participants) stated that they were told about the room by Student Disability Services. Perhaps most strikingly, half of the women in this study said that they were never told about the room, while two of the women were only informed about the room by a friend who was using it.

In addition, in many of the conversations with the women about this room, many of them were concerned with the accessibility of it, particularly for students with physical disabilities. Rose for instance, stated:

*I don't know if you know this, there's like . . . a disability little corner in [name of library]. . . . In the basement. . . . In the **basement**. So the elevators will take you down there and you have a key and they have all different types of computers down there . . . but yeah, it's in the basement. But they don't, and that's the thing, they **don't tell you it's there**. So if I didn't run into somebody I know who is in there . . . and she told me about it, like, I've gone two and a half semesters without knowing about it. . . . They're not exactly **for** giving of the information that you would **like**.*

Again, issues of ableism and power are quite clear in Rose's comments. Firstly, students with disabilities are being removed from the *normal* student population and relegated to the basement of the building. Secondly, however, many students with disabilities could have made great use out of the specialized resources in this room and yet, many of the university staff were simply not sharing the fact that this room exists. Rose continued:

*I think [the point of putting it in the basement is]. . . they couldn't use the room like, it literally is like a hole in the wall. There's eight computers down there,*

*they've got a really big screen for somebody who's legally blind, they have a Braille machine down there, but essentially it's the only spot that they could really put it. . . . And it kind of feels almost like the students with disabilities are **out of the way**. . . . It's in the corner. . . . Mm hmm, [especially when the elevators are not working] then they can't go down there, there's no way. . . . But nobody **ever** told me it was there. . . . Cause . . . like I have a six hour break between my two classes on Tuesdays . . . and that I [sic] just try to figure out a spot where I can just, you know, veg out, and I can't really get comfortable on the [name of library] chairs but they actually have computer chairs that are ergonomically correct that I can sit in for hours down there.*

People with physical disabilities have been facing issues with accessibility and structural barriers for some time (Devlin & Pothier, 2006; Scott, 1993). Therefore, despite "evolving attitudes, policies and technology" (Glauser, 2015, p. 22) that have created a new "demand for inclusive spaces" (2015, p. 22) in postsecondary schools, it may be the case, at least for the women in this study, that they are still being challenged by these barriers.

Much like Rose, Anne was also concerned that the location would be particularly problematic for her, as a student with a visual impairment:

*Oh, honestly, I don't think that's accessible. . . . Especially . . . I don't think it's a good idea for a blind person to go to library . . . get to the basement . . . when they really want study [sic] at night. . . . It's gonna be hard. Like, I went there once, it's like . . . I was pretty lost in the library. . . . my advisor told me last year. . . . I was like, oh it's pretty cool at first but then . . . oh my God that's not accessible at all.*

Certainly, it is an absolute asset for a student with a disability to be able to function within an environment where they can be just like everyone else, namely an able-bodied person (Hehir, 2007). It is especially important then, in order to "maximize access" (Hehir, 2007, p. 11) for students with disabilities that they be given the right to be a full, productive student and citizen to their own school communities (Devlin & Pothier, 2006; Hehir, 2007). This starts of course, with notification of the services that are available to them and full access to be able to receive those services in a timely manner.



Further, in discussions regarding the accessibility of the basement room, some of the women questioned its seclusion. Adelaide for example, despite never being told about the room or seeing it for herself, began to question its remoteness:

*No idea about that, no. . . . Why is it so . . . like, tucked away like that? . . . And small? [slight pause] [light laughter] I did—I don't really . . . you barely go into [name of library] . . . basement I mean, into the basement, and then as soon as you see like, a keycard swipe on a door you mostly ignore the door.*

Similarly, Anna noted:

*[slight pause] Kinda like the basement of [name of building], it's like, kind of an after-thought. . . . just [slight pause], yeah it's like an after-thought. . . . "Maybe we should kinda put that in somewhere . . ." [sarcastic tone] [light laughter].*

These comments illustrate Foucault's (1975/1995) example of what happens when normalizing processes and power come to a town that has been infiltrated with the plague. Similarly then, perhaps both Adelaide and Anna recognized that by putting students with disabilities in a small room, cut off from the rest of the nondisabled population, those in power at the postsecondary level are demonstrating to others that students with disabilities should be ignored and kept away to make sure that they do not become interspersed with the "healthy" student body.

Further, while also questioning the accessibility of the room for students with physical disabilities, Michapentimento described the room as something less than desirable:

*I don't have a wheelchair . . . so it's fine for me. . . . And I don't use it at all . . . because my computer's fixed now. . . . But . . . like I said, it's fine for me but . . . I think if I had a wheelchair or something, it doesn't seem very . . . accessible. I don't know, there's—I'm sure there's elevators and stuff but . . . I don't know. . . . [the room is] Like a dungeon. . . . But . . . quiet! . . . Quiet dungeon.*

Much like the other women, Michapentimento likened the room itself to a dungeon, which for many people conjures images of a prison: dark, small, and isolated.

It is interesting to note, however, that while there was immediate recognition by the women with visible disabilities in this study about the room's inaccessibility, some of the women with invisible disabilities did not seem to recognize this as problematic.

Michelle and Brooke for instance, both women with invisible disabilities, shared that they had very positive feelings about the basement room. Brooke stated:

*[slight pause] I'm OK with it. . . . I mean, part of the library, I can be in my own room, all those things. . . . I haven't really seen it to tell you . . . exactly what I think of . . . the placement of the room but . . . I wouldn't put it anywhere besides the library myself. I wouldn't want it somewhere different . . . I feel like . . . it would fit there cause it could be like a little library for people who are different . . . which would be kind of cool to be in a library with all my friends . . . but have the opportunity to kinda isolate myself—extremely isolate myself from them cause I've tried to study with them and it's like everyone's talking and doing their own thing and I'm like, "I can't learn with you and I have to go sit somewhere else" and they're looking at me and I'm like, "This is really awkward." Like, so it gives me my own place to go . . . people don't look at me funny [laughter] . . . so that'd be cool.*

Brooke felt that by coming to the room to study and work on her assignments, she would not feel like she had to keep up appearances or keep up with the fast pace that her other nondisabled friends were at with their readings. She felt that by sharing the room with others like her, it would potentially make her feel more comfortable.

Similarly, while Michelle also revealed her positive sentiments about the room, she also mentioned that there may not be "a huge demand" from other students with disabilities in regards to using it for themselves. This is interesting, and perhaps unlikely, as so many women in this study were not told that this could be a potential resource for them to use. She noted:

*I personally love it. . . . I love that they've put in lockers, which is great. . . . it's small. Uh, but I think it's meeting the needs right now because there isn't a huge demand for it . . . I don't think many people use it. Umm, it's locked so you can like, leave your stuff in there which is great. Umm, my only problem with it I guess is that when you put a [light laughter] . . . small room with a high concentration of people with learning disabilities and like, Attention Deficit Disorder, it just*

*kinda gets chatty and you're constantly having to say like, "Can you please be quiet, can you please be quiet?" Umm, but I think . . . it's fine. . . . I'd say nine times out of ten I'm the only one in there. . . . And, yeah it's open as long as library hours are open. . . . Actually, wait. My only concern about it is that librarians don't have access to it so if you leave your stuff in there and you accidentally lock yourself out . . . they have no way to swipe you back in . . . and you have to wait 'til the next business day to . . . [knocks fingers on table] to get somebody from Disability Service to come over and let you in.*

The value constructions attached to those with disabilities are again brought to the forefront when Michelle notes that the *librarians* do not even have access to the room so if there is a problem, it is up to the student with the disability to figure out the solution for themselves.

It has long been understood that "as political institutions, universities are driven by power" (Pusser & Marginson, 2013, p. 547). It often the case that postsecondary school rankings "confer prestige" with respect to "the allocation of resources . . . as a means of stratifying national higher education systems [and] . . . establishing hierarchical relations between nations, and as a lever to impose demands for accountability and normative adaptation" (Pusser & Marginson, 2013, pp. 545-546). Higher rankings, naturally, are often earned through achievement in various performance standards (2013). However, these normative policies and standards may be hindering the progress and success of those with disabilities in their postsecondary academic and social environments. For the women in this study for example, there are numerous responsibilities that they must contend with. Firstly, they have to find out about the existence of the room to get the keycard to even begin to access it, and then find someone who works outside of the library to give them re-entry if they make a mistake. Perhaps the frustration from some of these women who have heard and internalized this message is reflected best in Amélie's sentiments:

*No . . . I feel unjustful [sic]. . . . I don't feel good. . . . No. . . . Yeah it would be helpful. . . . Thank you for letting me know. . . . That's what I'm telling you with the fact that [name of university] said it's justful and it's welcoming, and when it comes to letting people know about different, you know, like you told me, and I've been here for three years I never knew about it. And you know, I've been just studying at the normal sections sometimes, you know, computers . . . the chairs are so uncomfortable you know? I didn't know about it, and thank you for letting me know. . . . And it's this is [sic] exact examples that the school is not what it says it is.*

Further, in addition to these structural barriers that the women in this study have faced, they also noted having many other additional barriers that students without disabilities do not have. They often felt for example, that there were many more steps for them to take compared to other nondisabled students in terms of things that they need to do. In addition, it would seem that the extra time it took the women to complete these additional tasks affected many more women with learning challenges in this study than those with physical disabilities. The women felt that not only do they have their own disabilities to contend with on a daily basis, which could be a real challenge for them, but they also had added paperwork to complete, they needed to bring letters to their professors to get the accommodations they required, they may need to deal with issues that arose with professors and others on campus, and, among other things, they had to sign up to take their exams in other places. This is consistent with research by Mullins and Preyde (2013) which found that not only did the students with disabilities feel they had additional tasks to complete, but "the extra effort involved in navigating the bureaucracy of this system was reported as an additional source of frustration for the participants" (p. 153). Michelle's frustrations for example, came from the fact that all of these additional steps forced her to "level [a] playing field" for herself that was already supposed to be equal to begin with:

*Yes and I . . . think having **that** [issues to deal with regarding professors] on top of the stressors and the challenges of school is probably the most frustrating for me because it's one thing to be stressed with a midterm or the course load or whatever, but it's another thing to be stressed about the course load **and** I don't have the materials I can—I **need** to get through the course load or I don't have the time I need to complete this test or you know, I physically cannot remember what was said because I couldn't record . . . the lecture or something. It's just that added stress of not having the level playing field and having to constantly level it for myself.*

It is unfortunate that for Michelle, policies that should be in place to make life *less* arduous are failing her. Not only do they have the pressure of being just a *student* at the postsecondary level, and everything that comes with that in terms of deadlines and assignments, but she also has to deal with issues that other students do not, including not having the materials she needs to be successful in her classes. However, because postsecondary institutions hold themselves to very high standards and also bear the burden of managing their financial costs, these policies often "may be seen a fulfilling the legal requirements for access and accommodation but can fall far short of achieving equity" (Hibbs & Pothier, 2006, p. 195).

This lack of equity resulted in frustration for Michapentimento and Natalie as well. Michapentimento discussed the following in her interview:

*One thing that . . . is absolutely ridiculous is university in general. Umm, it's hard. It's very difficult . . . like, I was talking to our little one, the nine-year-old . . . she wants to go to university, I'm very proud of her, and I told her . . . when she gets here I'll help her with everything she needs to know because there's a bazillion things you need to do when you register for class, then you need to find everything, and then you're talking about a mentor and that's why . . . they help you with what you need to do . . . but I mean, like, I have my list that help me out with, "OK, you need to do this and . . ." but I mean even when you need to get your books, like, you register for classes, you get your books, you register with SDS [Student Disability Services] . . . like I get my books on CD, well I need to get my books, make sure I send my book list to [name] and then send my receipt to [name] too . . . like, there's **so** many things that I need to do semesterly and if I'm—forget one of those things—which I don't cause it's on the list . . . then I miss out on something really important . . . that I'm gonna need for the semester.*

It is true that many students with and without disabilities experience difficulties and adjustments when coming to university for the first time and throughout their undergraduate careers. Students with learning challenges especially, are faced with these adjustments as well as issues with the additional time it takes them "to read, research, write, or process information" which often results in lighter course loads and textbooks in other formats (Csoli et al., 2009, p. 57). Michapentimento continued:

*And then each semester I have my files made up for each class and stuff so it's just—there's a lot of stuff . . . to do and if you're a new student here, **who tells you this stuff?** My mom . . . isn't gonna know that, and if my dad were here like, he wouldn't know—neither of them have university . . . they have high school. . . . it's . . . hard.*

Similarly, Natalie also felt that the additional barriers that she has faced in university as a result of her disability were incredibly difficult for her. She stated:

*. . . and just saying when a student is experiencing a disability you do not know that they also, they are also working . . . they may also be volunteering . . . they're a family member. And when they're going to school . . . it's **very** difficult. . . . It was for me, my story [laughter].*

Undoubtedly, despite "equitable" policies in place to help them, some of the women in this study are still having difficulty overcoming additional barriers in their postsecondary experiences.

In addition to the policies not being helpful in eliminating these additional barriers for women with disabilities, they also further the normative agenda by those in power.

Joy for example, noted the challenges she faces in signing up for her examinations:

*You have to book stuff [with Student Disability Services] so much far [sic] in advance so you're dealing with like—every other student doesn't have to do that. They don't have to book their tests with Student Disability Services like, **twenty-one** days before . . . and they don't have to make sure they get letters to professors and go meet with them. So, you're now adding an additional three, four steps, which doesn't sound like a lot but . . . when you're working a part-time job—well some people work full-time jobs, like, I know I work a part-time job.*

Hibbs and Pothier (2006) discussed writing examinations as an illustration of failing policy in postsecondary education. For example, if *everyone* in the class was given extended time on exams or given exams that they can take home, then perhaps students with disabilities would not have to face additional barriers like arranging these testing dates, single themselves out as needed those accommodations, and "would have no need for additional accommodation" at all (2006, p. 199). For Joy and the other women with disabilities in this study, this strategy may alleviate these additional steps, steps that other students without disabilities do not have to tackle on a daily basis.

Women with both physical disabilities and learning challenges in this study faced various barriers in their postsecondary experiences. It would seem that while the women with visible disabilities were impacted by structural barriers and accessibility issues on campus considerably more than those with invisible disabilities, women with learning challenges, who noted having other additional barriers which were perceived by them to create greater time constraints, seemed much more impacted by these barriers than those with physical disabilities. In fact, being oppressed in multiple ways is another theme which will be discussed below.

### *Multiple Oppressions*

Women, and specifically women with disabilities, encounter oppression in multiple ways throughout the course of their lives (Ferri & Gregg, 1998). According to Ferri and Gregg (1998), women with disabilities face multiple oppression which is *emphasized* by their status as a woman with a disability. In addition, women who face multiple oppressions in their lives, such as having a disability, being a woman, and also identifying as a minority for example, are also more likely to suffer domestic violence and abuse (Mays, 2006).

Interestingly, four of the women in this study discussed the fact that they felt they were oppressed in multiple ways. Further, *all* four of these women were either a visible minority or self-identified as having minority status in society. It would seem then, that it is the intersectionality of all three identity categories (being a woman, having a disability, and identifying as a minority) that has made them feel this way. Anita, in discussions about her many negative encounters with professors throughout her university experience, felt that part of the problem was because she felt oppressed in multiple ways. For her, this recognition that she is in some way different, not only from others on campus who do not have disabilities but perhaps also from other white women with disabilities, made it more difficult for her to speak to people in an authoritative position:

*I feel like the only thing that may kind of make a difference for me particularly is because not only do I have a . . . disability but I am a . . . obviously, a . . . minority. . . . And I'm a woman. So I have all these things working against me. I feel like that may be a reason why it is harder for me . . . to kind of talk to these professors.*

In an interview with an African-American woman with a learning challenge, Petersen (2006) recognized that through her experiences in school, she developed an understanding of social constructions of gender, constructions which often assign "power and position" (p. 728) in society. Not only did she understand these constructions, but "she internalized apparent difference as biologically justified, thus reinforcing and sustaining a subtle discrimination that works against her best interests" (2006, p. 729). In much the same way, Anita has not only internalized the *proper* way to be a woman, quiet, caring, and shy, but she has also internalized ideas about disability and race, namely that they are *lack*. Of course, these ideas have worked against her in the sense that her best interests in academia are not being met, as having relationships with professors is an important part of the process.



Similarly, Amélie recognized differences in the experiences of others on campus who were visible minorities as well as in her experiences on campus as a self-identified black woman with a physical disability. She described a two instances where she believed that friends of hers were treated unfairly because of their ethnicity. She stated:

*I have my acquaintance who's in business and who basically said that his professor was prejudiced against him because he's . . . a South Asian person . . . and when he complained to human rights offices they did not do much because that professor always do[es] that. My another acquaintance she was on her laptop and she was . . . obviously yeah professor said, "You cannot be on Facebook", [during class] you know? But he actually kicked her out, out of class and she, you know, she's like me, she's Black, and he . . . completely said, "That's it" for her not to come anymore to the class and she had to drop the class, and she was doing very good in that class, and she said that it was very emotional, stressful, with the fact how he treating her and how everyone saw how he treated her and then she had to drop the class and she didn't have any type of . . . you know, solution and consultation, and professor he didn't even ask her apologies for what he did to her.*

Further, Amélie herself also encountered a situation with a professor on campus where she felt that she was not treated the same as another young woman who was White. She added:

*And there was one other instance when . . . I was like, in my class and you know, I was participating in my class, yet there was one situation when I didn't have participation marks and I know one. . . [other]. . . student who doesn't participate, she even doesn't have . . . doesn't come to class, but she had higher marks than me . . . and why is that? Why is that a person who never comes to the class, never participates and even, you know, like, I read her assignment, my assignment was much more better [sic] because I went to writing . . . skills . . . writing . . . in [name of school library] and I ask to proofread it and still my paper was, in my opinion, it deserved better than that. . . . And I have so many other examples that I can like go for hour [sic] . . . of me and like, other people who are experience [sic] injustices.*

Amélie has certainly expressed a heightened awareness and understanding that being a black student with a disability has resulted in instances of oppression and discrimination that other students do not often encounter. It was evident in Amélie's comments that she has felt slighted in many of her experiences on campus. Unlike Anita, however, she did

not internalize the messages that she is somehow less than any other student. In quite the opposite way, she recognized that these behaviours from those around her are unfair and unethical.

Interestingly, Kelly, an Aboriginal woman, and Anne, a woman of Chinese descent, constructed their oppression as particularly isolating. This is not unusual, as some people believe that "having a disability may isolate people with disabilities from their ethnic/racial group" and vice versa (McDonald, Keys, & Balcazar, 2007, p. 147). This concept of isolation from society is reflected quite clearly in Kelly's comments in two ways, the first being that she felt she is *different* from those around her, and the second is that she also felt she does not fit in due to these differences. She stated:

*The roadblocks [are the biggest challenge]. Oh my gosh there are so many, especially for women who have a disability in society, and a minority on top of it. I'm hitting a roadblock everywhere I turn but—and I actually sometimes feel like I've hit the end of my academic career cause I can't push through to get my Honours. It's so difficult. It's like, there's a cap . . . on what I can achieve unless I choose to spend a couple years here, which then I would **finally** get it, I know I would, it would just take a little bit longer than most people. It really sucks, it's, really difficult. . . . I think the major roadblock is the learning disability that has been passed down from generation to—I'm not at par with the students who have grown up in a normal family, who have been surrounded by role models, people with educations, etcetera. I don't really know how to behave in society. There's etiquette that I am certainly probably unaware of. . . . I am constantly frustrating people . . . because I'm just like, doing my own thing, kinda not bound by a little box that society lives in. Umm, so that can be frustrating . . . on everyone's part . . . really.*

Kelly's belief that she is "not at par" with other students is particularly problematic.

According to Goodley (2013), various *Other* identities like women and people of colour for example, "share an Other space to that of the dominant same that is founded upon ableist, heteronormative, adult, white European and North American, high-income nation's values" (Goodley, 2013, p. 637). Like Anita and Amélie, Kelly also shared a distinct understanding of her place in society. She recognized that she did not fit the

categories of normal to which the rest of society subscribes. This in turn, has not only isolated her, but has also made her feel that there is a limit to any kind of success she may achieve in her academic experiences. Similarly, Anne added:

*It's like different stigmas I would say like in social psychology in, like in-group versus out-group, like the majority which is in-group in society would think, "OK all the people in the out-group look the same" and they . . . judge them in a certain way, which is not fair at all. . . . And, yeah. . . . Especially . . . you're a woman, and you have a disability like, you . . . are oppressed in different, like, multiple ways. . . . And I would say in China . . . kids with disabilities are most likely to attend . . . the special residential schools designed for them. . . . And it's . . . a form of isolation. . . . I would say. . . . And . . . after they graduate they can only do certain things. . . . And . . . in regular schools . . . the accommodation stuff does not go really well. I mean, things are improving, but compared to things here, it's pretty much limited.*

Much like the other women, Anne's example of the in-group versus the out-group also reflects her awareness and internalization (Petersen, 2009) of what it means to be labeled as something other than normal. She also used the comparison of the experiences of those with disabilities in China compared to their experiences here in Canada. While she alluded to the fact that students with disabilities here have many more opportunities and decisions than they would have back in China, she also recognized the stigma that is the same *anywhere* for females and those with disabilities. This is a stigma that in her opinion, only increases if that person associates with both identities, which led her to immediately assign it the "out-group" label.

It is clear that instances of multiple oppression have affected these women in several ways. While feelings of inferiority were internalized and reproduced for some, feelings of anger and isolation were also felt by others. Interestingly as well, of the four women that encountered oppression on multiple levels, two were women with learning challenges and two were women with physical disabilities. Also, it seemed that for the women in this study that did encounter multiple oppression, they felt frustrated and in

some cases, an uncertainty of how to proceed. It is critical to further examine how feelings of multiple oppression can be understood and eradicated at the postsecondary level in order to help these students succeed in an accepting postsecondary environment. The examination of support systems on campus like mentors and other resources is perhaps one of the ways in which to begin. These will be discussed below.

*Tutors/Mentors/Community Sense/Lack of Resources*

It has been shown in previous studies that a strong support system is an important factor in achieving academic success for students with disabilities (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Goode, 2007; Gregg, 2007; Troiano et al., 2010; Hinckley & Alden, 2005; Hogansen et al., 2008; Skinner, 2007; Wilson et al., 2000). In addition, Garrison-Wade (2007) noted the important role disability advisors play in providing a strong mentor to students with disabilities in terms of helping them be assertive and offering emotional support. Yet, despite the fact that many of the women in the study noted that having a mentor on campus would be beneficial for them, only approximately 31% of the women mentioned that they had one. However, approximately 63% of the study participants, including two of the women who stated they had a mentor, felt there was a shortage of tutors and/or mentors, little sense of community, and a lack of resources for them on campus. Some of these women simply noted that they did not have a mentor, even though they felt it would be beneficial for them, because the people who could potentially be mentors to them, like faculty members and others in advisory roles, are often too busy.

In addition, some of the women also discussed the importance of having a support system in place for students with disabilities by the students themselves, which they felt was missing from their campus experiences. Maria for example, felt that it would be very

beneficial for her to have a mentor on campus, but also noted the importance of talking to someone she can relate to:

*Absolutely, definitely [it would be helpful for me to have a mentor here]. I mean . . . my family sees it as like my older brother is my mentor cause he went to university and all these things but I mean, he's . . . working now and . . . I would definitely benefit from having a mentor who's here in the now . . . like you know, a student as well or somebody who has . . . similar experiences as me, someone who's really wise . . . someone that I can sort of talk to cause for instance, even if my brother tried to be my mentor . . . he wasn't involved with Student Disability Services, he didn't live in [name of city] he lived in a—much better city, or at least he lived in a better part of the city then for instance—that's another thing like, I feel like I need to—I don't really—I feel like I would feel better about the [name of university] if I had more respect for the city of [name]. . . . I just feel like being a student in this area . . . it's really depressing and . . . it's really hard to just get up and be motivated for another day at school if like the city is really crappy [laughter]. . . . That's what I think.*

Further, Adelaide and Brooke also discussed the importance of having a support system of other students with disabilities, as they can relate to their postsecondary experiences, both positive and negative. Adelaide stated:

*[breathes in] [slight pause] Some type of support system for students . . . even **by** students. Like, I asked around, “Is there no like, support group where like maybe once or twice a month kids . . . who have these problems can get together and talk about it?” . . . We don't even have anything like that in [name of city]. . . . Which is ridiculous . . . Especially . . . with a disorder like ADHD because you feel alone, well, like a lot of disorders I guess. Umm, and you feel like you're maybe crazy and you doubt yourself **constantly** so just to have like a group of people who are going through the same thing as you who can give you tips and keep you on track. Someone with ADHD needs someone to keep them on track. That's why coaching is such an effective tool. . . . So something like that I think would be **really** helpful.*

Brooke added:

*Cause . . . you know, we can talk about being an undergrad . . . this whole time, but like, that's—I probably wouldn't have gotten here . . . if I didn't have someone telling me how I could do it and watching someone do it . . . I would have felt smaller than I already did . . . So I . . . really feel bad for those people who don't have that and I think that that needs to try and be incorporated. . . . Success stories, in certain ways I think would be the only way that—I don't know I . . . yeah. The transition from high school to university is extremely scary for any student . . . let alone with LD, cause you're in here into an academic institution where everyone's afraid and you struggle academically.*

Reflecting Brooke's comments, Field et al. (2003) discovered that having good social support systems, with friends or significant others for example, for students with disabilities is "...vital to their success" (p. 342). Certainly for Brooke, having someone on campus who understands her and who can guide her in her decision-making has been critically important to her overall experience. While acknowledging that entering university can be a scary time for any student, it may be particularly so for students with learning challenges as they need to work through academic challenges within academic institutions. Brooke went on to describe this experience further:

*So it's like . . . entering a pool without knowing exactly how to . . . swim in the right way and it's completely traumatizing . . . but I think that there needs to be like at least . . . kind of a counseling thing maybe for all of us to get together to support each other and, "I did this, did you did this [sic]? Did you sign up for this? What about these programs?" They do have STEPS programs or something that helps us . . . kind of things but I only went to one and . . . it's not the best turnouts and stuff, but I think there just needs to be more of a community and more support within LDs and disabilities so that we don't feel so alone and small in a pool where we really can't swim the right way, right? . . . So hopefully, more support and like, just a community sense, right? . . . Would really help kids at **this** level . . . continue to—to strive and—and thrive, right?*

It is unfortunate that these women noted feeling alone in their experiences on campus.

Feeling like they are not isolated entities within a much larger pool is critically important as it has been found previously that having people in their lives to offer both support and guidance is particularly important to young women with disabilities as they transition into adulthood (Hogansen et al., 2008). For the women in the current study, being able to talk to others like them, people who shared similar experiences while on campus, would be particularly effective in encouraging them to continue by making them feel supported and perhaps even *understood* in a way that other students and people on campus cannot.

In addition to the support needs from the women in this study mentioned above, some of the other women also noted that finding mentors and tutors was especially difficult, due to a lack of these resources, as well as others, even being available. Kelly for instance, noted:

*Honestly, if I could . . . if I were an A student I would teach those who want to learn how, to do it. . . . but then, if you have a learning disability, if you guys read a page at the same time, one retains it, one doesn't, what are you gonna do about that? There's nothing really you can—you have to just **accept** it. . . . But if there were help, it would be tutors. . . . More tutors available. . . . And there's not. . . . And if they are, they're **really** expensive . . . like twenty dollars an hour. No student can really afford that. . . . There was a writing centre—academic writing centre, they took that away for a few years and that **sucked** cause that was the only thing I had goin' . . . cause . . . if I can at least learn how to write, I'd be OK. . . . But . . . they took that away, I don't know why . . . and now there isn't any writing centre help. . . . Just gone . . . [maybe] Budget cuts, who knows?*

Similarly, Natalie added:

***Clearly** there's something happening there and a lot of it was my disabilities not being addressed . . . in a way that was—there's not even an ADD coach. I requested that and, I have to like, wait, be put on a waitlist so I can access that. I feel like they're waiting for people to advocate strong enough to say, "We need this" [hits table] . . . when really it should just be more like, there should be more outreach instead of expecting the students to advocate. . . . More like, "Did you know that we can have this for you?" Cause I had no idea. . . . And even when I was like, "Hey, like is there anything . . ." I had to be like, "Is there anything that can kinda help me with all of this crap I'm experiencing right now?" . . . And there wasn't a coach. There was someone that had to take . . . I guess this is starting to get . . . it was more like having to take . . . initiative and maybe the people in the office might be taking on more than they should be.*

Other researchers have shown that resources in postsecondary education are lacking (Jung, 2011; Wilson et al., 2000). In addition, these resources, when in place, are often ineffective (Kuerth & Mellard, 2006). In Kelly and Natalie's experiences, access to supports and services that would help them be more successful in their academic experiences on campus simply were not there. Thus, these women are again pushed out of a system that emphasizes money and "ability".

Adelaide as well, noted that there were a lack of resources on campus, particularly for those students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, a diagnosis she just received last year. She stated:

*There's no support groups on campus, there's not really much information, and . . . I feel like it's a lot more common than people think. . . . Especially in young women, cause they get overlooked at a young age. . . . They're not as hyperactive as their counterparts. Umm, so it was kind of just . . . I just [said] like . . . forget the university and went with my own doctors, did my own research, found my own psychologist . . . and that's it.*

In addition to expressing her desire for more resources, Adelaide's comments also reflected her recognition of the gender differences between boys and girls in schooling as it relates to the identification of disorders. For example, girls are often diagnosed as having primarily inattentive types of ADHD, whereas boys tend to receive higher rates of the primarily hyperactive forms of the disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013a; Rucklidge, 2010; Weiss, Worling, & Wasdell, 2003) which may lead to more girls being overlooked. It is no secret that boys and girls are treated differently throughout their entire schooling experiences, beginning in elementary school (Sadker et al., 2009).

Adelaide understood that her gender may have been the cause of her learning challenge being neglected earlier in her schooling experiences. Unfortunately, she also felt neglected in her postsecondary schooling experiences as well, despite how common she felt her disability was for women on campus, perhaps because her learning challenge did not fit the societal expectation of what it means to be a woman: docile and quiet.

Moreover, this lack of resources may often be adding to another problem for people with disabilities on university campuses, a problem which makes obtaining these much needed resources even more difficult. Researchers like Garrison-Wade (2007) have discovered that students with disabilities simply do not know enough about their own



disabilities and therefore, lack the awareness to ask for help when they need it. When Michelle for instance, took a proactive approach and continued her own efforts to "battle the system" (Goode, 2007, p. 44) by bringing these issues to the disability services office, they stated that there simply were not enough people who wanted the services:

*I don't think there's any . . . programs . . . offered, any sort of mentorship programs. I actually said this to somebody the other day . . . I said, "Why don't we have like a mentorship program within Disability Services?" cause we have that like, SOS [Students Orienting Students] on campus . . . and . . . mentors within faculties and stuff and they said, "There just isn't enough interest" and . . . they kind of brush it off and I said like, "You know, this would actually be a good thing to have" and they said, "Well, if you think it's so good like, start it yourself" and I was like, "Maybe I will one day . . . when I have all this time." . . . But you know, it . . . something that has been recognized as a need but the resources just aren't there.*

Similarly, Melanie added:

*I don't know how this would get done, but I think that incoming students should get more information on what disabilities are cause . . . like, we get info on accommodations and technology and all that kind of stuff but I think one of the big reasons, just judging by people I know, that people don't register with Disability Services and get their accommodations and stuff, I think . . . they still feel like having disability [sic] is associated with being less smart and it makes them feel less capable, so if there was some way to get more info to incoming students about what their learning disability actually **means** . . . I think that would be helpful.*

It would seem then, that if the students with disabilities themselves do not have enough of an understanding of their own disabilities, the postsecondary institutions that they are attending, and where they are sometimes diagnosed, have a responsibility to assure that their entire student population, including students with disabilities, are receiving adequate resources and supports during their time on campus.

Support services on campus in the form of mentors, tutors, support groups, and other academic support resources seem to be lacking for the participants in this study. For some of the women, mentors like those in the disability services office, played a vital role

in their lives on campus. However, the majority of the other women believed that while these supports and resources would be beneficial, they simply were not in place.

### *The Student Disability Experience*

It has been found by Adams and Proctor (2010) that "students with disabilities are more at risk in terms of their overall student adaptation to the college experience, social adjustment, and institutional attachment to college" (p. 175). Perhaps it was the recognition of these higher risks that led many of women in this study to discuss the registration process at the disability services office on campus. As noted earlier, all of the women in this study were registered with Student Disability Services at the time of their interviews, except one woman, who was currently in the middle of the registration process.

The reasons for registering that were given by the participants included recognizing their need for additional help and/or accommodations, wanting to be successful academically, being identified as having a disability earlier on in their school career so they viewed this as the next logical step, realizing the need for proper supports in place, it was recommended for them, and wanting to know their options. Melanie for instance, stated:

*I think it just felt like the obvious choice . . . because—I think it helped that I was diagnosed when I was eighteen. I didn't find out I had a disability 'til like, the end of high school. . . . So I never had that whole thing kind of in grade school or whatever, I know a lot of other people had the getting led off for extra help thing and they kind of felt bad about it, but for me it was more like, discovering that I wasn't stupid, that I had like, specific things that I needed to work on but that I had areas of strength and I got to learn more about what disabilities are so I didn't feel like having a disability made me stupid and I felt like getting accommodations was the smart thing to do. . . . So I think that was kind of my main thing.*

Michelle, Anita, and Brooke also agreed that being identified as a student with a disability early on in their schooling experiences had always given them access to accommodations, which they felt would only help them further in their postsecondary experiences. This is consistent with research undertaken by Hadley (2007) who discovered that first-year students with learning disabilities attending a postsecondary institution believed it was crucial that they continue to have the accommodations they had received in their earlier schooling years, as not only did they often feel challenged by certain academic expectations like writing, but they also "seemed exceptionally dependent upon the support services they had grown accustom[ed] to while in high school" (p. 12). Similarly, Anita also felt that continuing to receive accommodations in high school was a natural progression. However, she also noted that registering to receive these accommodations was never really a choice if she truly wanted to be successful in her program. She noted:

*Well I've always had accommodations throughout grade school . . . and high school so when they came to my high school to tell me that there were accommodations I found that, that that was my only option . . . because when you can't spell, you can't really hand in work that's legible. . . . like typing my work or using a dictionary for exams is the only way that I can get my work in. So, I felt like I . . . didn't really have . . . any type of **option**.*

In addition, furthering Anita's comments on lacking personal choice, Brooke added that it would be a foolish decision to *not* register for these services especially if a person has been receiving them throughout the majority of their schooling experiences already. Further, Brooke felt that it was important to acknowledge and accept the fact that she learns differently than others, which doesn't make her any less smart. She stated:

*Well I've had an IEP since grade four . . . and I've always been completely aware that I've always needed extra time and I've always went to different rooms for tests and I've always needed these things and I knew for a fact that if I tried to come into university without those things that I needed, I don't think I would have lasted more than a semester . . . cause I already struggled in that semester and . . . I've always known my disability and . . . my sister as well was like, you know, "I*

*did it. It helped me. It gave me all these things that I need. You have an IEP as well, you also need these things. Don't even. Don't even. Don't try . . . I believe in you but you have it, so you have to deal with it and . . . it's just an equalizer. It'll just help you." So her definitely w—was a key guidance role in, "I did this. It's helped me. You have to cont—continue doing it" but I think—I don't see why any student with an LD would enter another institution of . . . of learning and not be up front about that . . . cause it's definitely . . . it's an impairment of learning and we're here to learn and I need to be at a level where you are so that you know, we can learn together and I just maybe need an extra half an hour than you to write an exam but I mean, that's not so bad, like, I'm still as smart, I just need that extra half an hour because I'm . . . a little bit different.*

Unlike many other students who have disabilities, Brooke had a confidante in her older sister who also had a disability and knew what it was like. Therefore, it may be due to this confidence-building relationship, that she did not understand why others with a disability would not want to register for these services and identify themselves as a student with a disability. She continued:

*I think it's, **silly** to not be honest with the university about that cause it's just gonna hurt yourself, so I don't see why anyone would even come to an academic institution and . . . not say, "Since grade four I've had an IEP, but it's gone now" . . . like, they don't just leave, you . . . just keep going with it and I'm gonna identify it when I work . . . and I'm gonna identify it every single year . . . it's part of who I am . . . so I don't see why you would want to come into . . . university, especially in [name of city] or anywhere . . . and not say like, "This is who I am" . . . right? But—and if you do, like, I . . . feel bad for you [laughter]. . . . Like, how do you do it? [laughter]. Like, I don't know [laughter].*

In addition to registering for services at the university, she also stated that she plans on continuing to acknowledge her disability to her future employers as well as it is an important part of her identity. Perhaps Brooke's comments regarding the self-assuredness it takes to continue acknowledging the need for additional services and accommodations reflect her beliefs that embracing a disability as simply a difference rather than a *lack* of something is critically important. Olney and Brockelman (2003) also noted that the students with disabilities in their study not only had "come to appreciate their disabilities despite the negative messages they receive" (p. 42), but also "reject[ed] the perceived

negative assessments of others, reconceptualising disability as difference rather than deficit" (p. 42) despite what the larger society believes about disability.

As well as feeling like registering for services was the most logical option for them, a few of the other women noted that registration allowed them to put a support team in place for themselves when they needed it. They felt that this additional support would help them feel comfortable, and also help them to figure out what options were available to them. Maria for example, noted:

*Well I . . . OK so my first semester here first year . . . well, when I was younger I had worked with counselors and . . . psychiatrists so when I came to [name of university] I thought, "Well, I need to build a support team here as well" so I went to the . . . counseling centre, so I did six sessions there, but after I think you have to hire them privately. So then . . . the psychologist I was working with, the one I'm currently working with right now . . . he said, "Well, your sessions are done but you can hire me if you apply—if you're in OSAP you can hire me if you apply for this bursurary [sic] or grants . . . through OSAP" and then he said . . . "Student Disability Services can help you set that up." So then I went there and then while I was there at—it was to set up the thing so I could hire the . . . psychologist, and then . . . the . . . advisor that I had at the time he helped me set that up but also he talked to me about academics, which was great I wasn't expecting that at all.*

Similarly, Adelaide noted that her desire to register also came from a place of wanting to know what services were available for her to use. She added:

*I wanna just know what my options were. What can I use? What can the university provide for me with an actual diagnosis? . . . I get time and a half, in a distraction-free zone. Distraction-free zone helps a lot. . . . And time and a half helps a lot.*

For both of these women, the reasons for registration came from an internal understanding—a true desire to help themselves—by either attempting to put additional supports and services in place, or seeing what other available options could be given to them in addition to what they already had access to. Certainly, this desire from both women stems from not only an internal understanding of themselves, but also an internal

*awareness* that in order to have a smooth, successful, postsecondary experience, they require a bit more help than the average student, which may be why they made the decision to register for disability services in the first place.

As well as the reasons mentioned above by some of the women, two out of the three women with physical disabilities in this study noted that their reasons for registering stemmed from a desire to be physically comfortable in both their classes and writing exams. Rose noted:

*Because I knew when I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia five years ago? Six years ago? Umm, I knew at some point it would only get worse. It's not gonna get better, I'm not going to be able to do everything that I want to. . . . and then having the beginning stages of lupus thrown in on top of that . . . it really made me think, "OK I need to find a way that I can be comfortable in my classes" and that's what drove me to go talk to SDS.*

Similarly, Amélie added:

*Because . . . I could not you know, writing a midterm for me is hell . . . especially my back . . . and I have problems with my back. And . . . you know . . . using Disability Services to write exams it's very helpful. . . . Plus they have what's a special thing for my, like, legs and everything, so it is OK. . . . It's feels [sic] more comfortable . . . And it's calm and it's not too noisy, yeah. . . . and there's less stress.*

Unlike the other women, both Rose and Amélie regarded their physical comfort as being one of the main reasons that they registered for services with the disability office on campus. Both women recognized that their individual need to be comfortable in the chairs they were sitting in for both classes and exams may have a significant impact on their overall academic success. Therefore, the accommodations that could be provided upon registration like ergonomic chairs which minimized some of the pain these women were feeling in regular classroom chairs, was incredibly important for them.

One thing that is clear between the women in this study is that many of them chose to register for services because they realized on a personal level that they would need some sort of additional help to be successful in postsecondary school. Perhaps for many of the women with invisible disabilities, the desire for a continuation of the support systems that they had in place in their previous schooling experiences was so important for them because of the stigma and judgment from others in society that invisible disabilities can simply be rectified with a little hard work and effort. This added support then, may help them share their experiences with others and further legitimize their disability as "real". On the other hand, the need for physical comfort shared by those with visible disabilities as their reasons for registering is interesting in its own way. It may be that their acceptance and understanding of their own bodily capabilities as well as the acceptance of their disability by others allowed these students to feel more *legitimized* on campus and therefore, do not feel as strongly about registration for the purposes of building support systems or access to a greater number of accommodations.

In addition to the discussions surrounding the choice to register with the disability office on campus and the reasons given by the women for *why* they chose to register for these services, they also discussed the actual process of registration itself in terms of how easy or difficult it was for them. Perhaps most encouragingly, at the point in time the interviews took place, roughly 63% of the women interviewed felt that the registration process had been an easy one for them, with one of these women stating it had been much easier for her this year than last. It seems that one of the biggest factors that made the process easier for many of these women was the amount of time spent. It is perhaps no surprise then, that it would seem the less time that the women had to spend making appointments, attending meetings, and/or going through testing and assessments, the

easier they felt the process was. Melanie for example, noted that she found her registration easy because her assessments had been done recently and so she did not have to spent any additional time being assessed again. She stated:

*It was pretty easy [to register for the services]. . . . Partly because I had a recent psycho-ed assessment so I didn't . . . have to get reassessed. . . . So that helped, but also because my advisor like, he's still my advisor and I met him when I was still in my fifth year of high school . . . and he was super, super good about the whole thing. . . . Like, he walked me through everything. . . . Yeah [I started receiving accommodations right away]. . . . Partly because I met with my advisor already like, the year before . . . in spring cause I came for [abbreviated name of transition event] . . . which is . . . what does it stand for? [full name of transition event] . . . I think. . . . So, it was kind of like a presentation and stuff and information for students with disabilities. . . . For [name of college] and for here. . . . Yeah [I met with my advisor there], cause you had the option of meeting with an advisor like, then instead of waiting 'til the next year . . . so I did that . . . and that was good cause I already knew what my accommodations were gonna be, and I knew where the office was, and I knew who my advisor would be . . . so I had everything before the semester started.*

Again, it would seem that for Melanie the process itself was viewed as rather seamless and therefore, categorized as fairly easy one to go through. It did not take more than a few days and in Melanie's case, by starting the process early she knew what to expect, where to find everything, and how to get what she needed to start the semester with all of her accommodations right from the very beginning of the school year. Moreover, it seems to also be the case that women in this study like Melanie, who attended transition events prior to attending university felt more prepared and were much better informed about what to expect going in than some of the other women in this study. Anna and Michelle for example, two women with learning challenges who also attended one of the university's transition programs prior to starting their studies both noted that they felt more prepared and better informed than they would have been if they had not attended the program. In fact, Anna listed one of the university's transition events as her most positive experience since beginning her postsecondary education. She noted:



*Probably the [name of transition event] program [was my most positive experience]. . . . it's a portion of a week that is before you start your first year. Umm, there's kind of like, lecture-style classes . . . that is put on by Student Disability Services, so you're in a group of between ten and twenty students typically, and they help you go over like, study strategies and kind of what classes will be like, help you get a feel for where classes will be on campus and you at least know a few people. . . . directions aren't really easy for me so definitely getting to know the campus ahead of time, making friends ahead of time, so . . .*

Similarly, by attending this transition event, Michelle felt that she was informed about other campus resources. She stated:

*When I started first year I did this program called the [name of transition event] program . . . which stands for something like [full name of transition event], something like that. Umm, I did that program and that was part of the tour and they've given us all keys for it and I've just renewed it every year . . . and they showed us, everything.*

Unfortunately, however, while the majority of women in this study found the registration process to be rather quick and easy, five women, all with learning challenges, found the process of registering with student disability to be a difficult and lengthy one. This is consistent with research conducted by Goode (2007) which indicated that the bureaucratic red tape caused lengthy waits for the reasonable accommodations that students with disabilities are required to receive. The women in this study as well, noted difficulties in the time it took to get the testing and documentation required by the university and also in the length of time it took to get the accommodations they needed in place for their classes even after their registration was complete. Not only that, but according to these women, the process itself can also be very expensive to do.

This added time and expense for students with disabilities, particularly for those with learning challenges, may simply be a fact of their disability being an invisible one. Olney & Brockelman (2003) noted that "students whose disabilities were not readily

apparent believed that people with visible disabilities had a stronger claim to support than they did" (p. 44). Natalie for example, noted:

*And it's perfectly reasonable for me to access services. Even though I felt that . . . I had a[n] . . . assessment when I was eight and they say [sic], "You have like superior intelligence, but you also have ADD, that's quite common". And I saw it as, well I'm accessing these services but other people need it more than me. And now I'm **really** noticing that I really wish this would have been . . . like, in place. I could have accessed these sooner.*

While it has been found in other studies that students with disabilities "still need to advocate for basic accommodations" (Dowrick et al., 2005, p. 44), it is unfortunate that access to these resources is still impeding the "level playing field" that disability policy in postsecondary education is supposed to be doing (Hibbs & Pothier, 2006, p. 195).

Three of the women that noted the registration process was particularly difficult for them also shared their feelings of frustration and anger at the process itself. For many, the expense alone was an incredible amount for a student to pay, but they did not feel like they had any other choice. Further, according to Dowrick et al. (2005), the students with disabilities "...who had difficulty accessing assistive technology saw it as a political or funding problem" (p. 44). These views were also shared by the women in this study who had difficulty getting the technology and devices they required to achieve equity in the classroom. Joy and her younger sister Brooke, for instance, had huge issues in getting the technology they required within a normal period of time. She stated:

*I would say [my experience on campus has been] mediocre. . . . I was told I had to get to university to get any technology assistance because I'm high-functioning. . . . So they wouldn't give me any technology in high school or anything, but in university I'd get technology. Downside is, is because if you are high-functioning. . . even still at university, it took me a **year** to get tested and my technologies. So, for a whole—my first year I had no assistance except for extra time.*

It would seem that in many ways, the university did not follow through with giving Joy the technology she needed. To be expected to wait an entire year to get this assistance is

25% of most undergraduate students entire university career. Part of the problem too, according to Joy, is that there were far too many students who required testing and little communication from university staff as to how and when to start the process. She continued:

*[It took so long because], there was a backlog . . . of students. . . . [To get] Testing done at the university . . . that they will accept. So I find that there's . . . less communication telling you what you need to have prepared, cause you're just kind of, "Well, we'll figure out when you get here" . . . but when you get here, you've got midterms starting in September . . . and you're like, "Oh no."*

Not being told right away what she needed to do was certainly a frustrating experience, but also one that could have potentially affected her academics considerably had she not been able to adapt. She went on to say:

*Well [at the first meeting with your SDS advisor] they kinda explain to you that like, you're not gonna get everything you got in high school and you're not gonna get all like, the bells and whistles. You're not gonna get like, Dragon on the computer or Kurzweil. You'll get like . . . the **bare** essentials like, you'll get to go in a room with other people in disabilities, you don't get your own private room . . . and you'll just get like, extra time and that's kind of the kit and caboodle you get. . . . Very general. . . . Compared to . . . like after I got my testing, I need Dragon, Kurzweil . . . Inspiration as well . . . so, not having that for a year was interesting . . . But that takes time, right? Cause the doctor has to do your report, transcribe everything, find your answer, then give it back to you. Not to mention you've got reading weeks, you've got exams, you both have to find a common time to do these grueling testings, right? . . . Cause it's not very like, light testing cause . . . they're . . . challenging .*

Despite having an entire year without equitable resources to help her have the same opportunity for success as nondisabled students, she had to learn other ways that work for her. Further, Joy noted that the registration process was very expensive as each student being tested at the university has to put down thousands of dollars of their own money which does not get refunded to them if a disability is not found in the required testing. She added:

*If you were tested and not found with a disability it's two thousand dollars, so you have to put on the line two thousand dollars. . . . If you're found tested [sic] it'll be government funded if you have OSAP . . . You have to get at least a dollar from OSAP [or it comes out of your own pocket]. . . . So for students whose parents might not make it, but don't compensate their children for OSAP, who don't compensate and who aren't eligible for OSAP, they're kind of—they don't get a technology grant. . . . So they're in trouble. . . . It costs a lot of money to get Dragon and Kurzweil and essentially a MAC . . . laptop. . . . Like my sister hasn't got her technology yet and now she's in the middle of her second year. . . . and she was tested awhile ago like, last year.*

The long wait times for accommodations as well as the huge expense for disability testing are additional ways in which the university maintains ableist practices. By not making the testing accessible to everyone because of the high cost that students are likely to incur if they are wrong, many students may choose not to get tested at all. In addition, having to wait several months to a year to actually receive any support for their diagnosed disability makes these students learn to adapt and adjust to the normative standard on campus and work around their disability in order to fit in.

Similarly, like her sister, Brooke also had issues with wait times for accommodations and testing which forced her to fit into the status quo. She stated:

*Yeah [it took a long time] to get [the testing and accommodations] . . . I didn't start getting accommodations until second semester . . . so the whole first semester was completely awkward for me . . . and trying to basically . . . normal student kind of life, which I just haven't done since grade four . . . right? So it was completely challenging, I got through it [laughter] . . . it was fine, and . . . everything else was run smoothly, getting . . . the technology that I need, getting those things have run smoothly, but it was a semester of my life that I haven't had and that was really hard . . . to be . . . they explained it to me . . . it's like, people need glasses, right? . . . So, an LD is like I just need a pair of glasses but kind of from your brain, so . . . I just didn't have those glasses . . . for a semester . . . of my undergrad and that was just like I couldn't see theoretically, with the glasses kind of analogy.*

Due to the long wait, she had to try and get by without her technology in all of her classes as best she could. In effect, she had to acquire information with a whole new method of

learning that was not sufficient for her to be successful. In short, she had to adapt to the standard of normal that society has created, or fail. She went on to say:

*It was—em—but I got it, like, it was fine . . . but I really would have wished that they could have worked with me in the summer more, cause we came here to work with them and they were kinda like, “Yeah, yeah, we’ll wait” so I think that[name of university] should—for their undergrads kind of—if they are aware of them, cause it’s on my file my whole life and I know you have to test me again, but get the testing started in the summer, someone would get here, we’re already working on what I need, so if I could get that testing done in the summer that would have been like . . . the **prime** thing to do . . . so it’d be my only thing that I thought could have really benefitted my undergrad first semester.*

Brooke seemed to identify here the problems which exist within the system itself. Her recognition that they must be aware of the fact that she has a disability, then it must mean that they are actively ignoring it as well. Further, Brooke also mentioned the fact that it could have taken such a long time because she had to "prove" that she actually had a disability. She added:

*I can’t exactly remember [why it took so long]. I just remember that it was a lot of—I had to like, prove a lot of things and get a lot of things sent to them. I had to get . . . all my IEP forms from my grade school over to here, they had to go over them and prove them, I have to set up an appointment with her—the psychologist and everything and that . . . took time for them to go all over my results and just say, “Yes, you do have one” or, “You don’t have one.”*

It is interesting that as a student with a learning challenge, Brooke had to expend a lot of effort in order to show those at the university that her disability was legitimate. She continued to say:

*I just think it was like, a long process of getting my forms over . . . . And . . . it’s our fault too cause we were aware of the process cause [sister’s name] went through it . . . but we kind of brought them over and they’re like, “Oh, well just kind of wait” and we’re like . . . [hits hands on table and makes nonverbal gesture] “Oh, that’s fine.” . . . I think it was the forms . . . the transition over, I wish that could have happened sooner so then I could have got tested like September, October. I was tested in December. . . . So it was literally like, a full . . . half a semester at least . . . and then by the time everything got checked and done and . . . they said I had one, then I had to have a meeting with them to say*

*what I did get, what I didn't get . . . all these things, so it did take a little bit of time . . .*

As Brooke continued, she seemed to back away from implying there is a systemic problem and instead, blamed herself and the intensity of the process, with all of its moving parts, as being the real issue.

Like Joy and Brooke, Adelaide (who was in the process of registering at the time of her interview) and Natalie also spent a great deal of both money and time to try and achieve equity. Adelaide stated:

*I haven't gotten the . . . full assessment yet. . . . I'm in the process of doing it right now with Disabilities. Umm, to do it outside, without the university, or if I didn't have proper coverage with OSAP, costs like fifteen hundred to three thousand dollars depending on psychologist, certain tests . . . but it is a long process after you get diagnosed because you have to go your advisor, he gives you papers, take it back to your psychologist, bring it back, then you have to fill out a questionnaire and then bring that back and it's like a lot of back and forth and it takes weeks and weeks. . . . I went to . . . [Student] Disabilities . . . early September, as soon as I started school and I still haven't been assessed. . . . But . . . that doesn't affect their services that they can provide me. . . . I still get time and a half and I still get to benefit from that. So it's just a matter mostly of . . . kind of knowing for sure . . . or knowing the details, or . . . knowing if there's any other learning disabilities that we're not aware of, that can help me.*

It was my understanding through the interviews with the women in this study that students can request accommodations like extra time even prior to being registered. Therefore, with extra time being one of the major accommodations that Adelaide felt she needed, this process did not necessarily affect what was being provided for her. Instead, her lengthy wait and frustration came from the testing process and the monetary expense.

In addition, one of the women who voiced her many frustrations about the time and money the registration process required for students with disabilities was Natalie. She stated:

*I went through high school with an Independent Education Plan [sic]. Umm, being diagnosed with ADD when I was seven . . . and then I was hesitant to access*

*services at the university . . . part of it is there is a stigma associated with having ADD . . . so I was definitely reluctant to reach out . . . and then by the time by the time I went to reach out. . . . cause its taking me awhile to get my undergraduate because of these challenges . . . it came to the point where my IEP, all my diagnosis, **everything** that legitimized my disability was no longer relevant. . . . I now had the added barrier of trying to be registered with Student Disability on a permanent basis. Which was very . . . emotionally exhausting when you're trying to do school, you're trying to work, you're trying to volunteer at the same time . . . then you're told "Oh, it looks like you do need some accommodations, but we're actually not going to validate your need for accommodations **because** you'd waited too long after high school." So . . . I had to get OSAP . . . so I could actually **pay** for . . . the services cause I couldn't qualify for OSAP cause my **parents** income.*

The desire from students with disabilities to step away from the deficient identity that was created for them by others in their earlier schooling experiences and begin anew has been illustrated in other studies (Marshak, Van Wieren, Raeke Ferrell, Swiss, and Dugan 2010). Natalie too wished to distance herself from her disability when she first began university. The problem with doing this in Natalie's case though, was that when she finally accepted that she may need some additional help and support, she had to begin all over again in terms of getting the required documentation and testing. Thus, starting at the foundational level caused additional frustration for her. She added:

*I actually was in a bit of a limbo where I'm like getting temporary services cause I had enough documentation for that, but I also didn't have the finances because OSAP rejected me. I had to wait until I had that period where I could **finally** . . . get OSAP, receive it, so that the \$2000 fee would be covered. So I could get the identity that I've already had since I was seven. I had in [sic] again in . . . grade eight, I had again when I was seventeen. Umm, seventeen I actually had the ADD . . . depression—or not depression yet, but anxiety. They've already identified that. All of that wasn't relevant because I needed to be an adult.*

Much like Brooke's experiences, Natalie too had to legitimize the fact that she had a real disability and needed help. Not only was she only permitted to receive services on a temporary basis, but the fact that she lacked the money to pay for disability testing again also disqualified her. This is despite that fact that she knew already what the results of the

disability testing would indicate. To university staff, everything that was diagnosed previously was dismissed. She continued:

*If I had waited . . . or if I had gone [snaps fingers] more immediately after high school . . . cause the IEP would still be relevant . . . but there's this . . . break off period which makes it difficult for people to access . . . the services, at least from my own experience, cause I had so much difficulty . . . in that it's hard enough to try and access these services and then to get turned down when you're feeling so vulnerable and knowing that people are, like, there's a lot of judgment, especially ADD makes you like, miss class . . . or you're late, or—and ADD, depression, like anxiety, same thing, and to not have a validation of "This is your experience, and we validate this by allowing you . . . ", it feels like **allowed** to be registered with Student Disability.*

Natalie clearly felt overwhelmed and frustrated by the process, but she also felt like they believed they were doing her some kind of favour by allowing her to register. She went on to say:

*[The experience was] Very stressful, very frustrating, and. . . [accessing services here is so difficult] Because they need to have a filter approach. . . . And that filter, it makes it—the more difficult it is to qualify services, the cheaper it is for a university to run, the cheaper it is for a government to run. . . . And if you were to open the door, there's this . . . misconception that once you make it a little **easier** for people to access services people are just gonna flood in cause they want free stuff. Seriously? . . . Do you think people wanna like, register at Student Disability? . . . I'm OK with it and I'm feeling more comfortable than ever . . . but it was a challenge. . . . And at twenty-four I am now only being more open and looking at it as "No this is actually an injustice" . . . instead of seeing it as "I waited too long, it's my fault" . . . and looking at the structures just not really . . . very **easy** to get the services.*

In Natalie's opinion, registration for a student with a disability was centered around money. If the institution made the process more stringent, fewer students would qualify for services (whether they needed them or not) and the university would have to put out less money for extra resources for that student. According to Natalie, the structures that are in place are operating under the assumption that making registration easier will result in less money for the university.



Further, although one woman with a physical disability, Amélie, noted that her registration process was easy, she also shared in the other women's frustrations with the amount of time it took to get the classroom accommodations she needed. In her case, these accommodations consisted of a specialized chair for her to sit in. She noted:

*Yes [it did take a long time to actually start receiving accommodations]. . . . It took like, one month. . . . when it comes to accommodations, first I have to book an appointment with my coordinator, and my coordinator then have to send someone to bring, for example, a chair to the class.*

Unfortunately, lengthy wait times for testing and to actually receive accommodations was not the only issue. For some women, once they had the accommodations they waited so long for, they sometimes did not work out. This was especially the case with note-taking services. A few of the women in this study mentioned the difficulty keeping their identity confidential and getting the notes they needed from their note-takers in a reasonable amount of time. In fact, in addition to barriers like identity issues and negative feelings and reactions from others, students with disabilities also experience issues with both the "expediency of service delivery" and "lack of compatibility with accommodations" (Marshak et al., 2010, p. 157). Namely, particular issues surrounding note-takers in that "students encountered . . . problems with anonymity, having unreliable students serve as note takers, and thinking that note takers are only for students with traditional and more obvious disabilities" (2010, p. 157). Joy and Maria for example, shared the obstacles they faced with note-takers on campus. In her comments, Joy specifically recalled how she realized that her identity and confidentiality was compromised when she requested to have the notes from class sent to her. She stated:

*Profs that make you handwrite notes is the **worst**. And then getting—and you can get someone to scribe for you in class, but if it's handwritten notes like such*

*as say like, chemistry, you—you're then you didn't have to go the person and be like, "Oh, you write my notes, now we need to go photocopy them together" like, it . . . will never happen . . . with me. I will never do that . . . you don't need to know . . . if you're giving me—notes. . . . I also think that's kind of unfair. . . . Cause I know people who have done notes and the person after that, they just never go to class. . . . Right? . . . The note-taker can go [to class] or someone in the class will email them the notes . . . . But now your name pops up on like, the [name of university] email . . . your full name will pop up with your . . . [name of university] thing so now they can go Facebook you and find out who you are. . . . And it might be one of your friends who doesn't know. . . . Really breaches the confidentiality.*

Obviously, confidentiality is a huge concern for Joy and a breach of trust with the university when her information is not kept confidential. In fact, Joy described one situation with a professor when he disclosed her identity as a student with a disability to a potential note-taker. She stated:

*I once one time didn't disclose to my professor I had a learning disability but I got an email . . . with the notes being sent to me. . . . So when you're typing in an email . . . if you go into like you know, your my [name of university] . . . if you type in someone's email . . . their full name will pop up. . . . You can look up anyone's name if you have their email. And . . . you could just type in their name and their email will pop down . . . . It includes faculty and staff as well, and students. . . . I threw a lid [when the professor contacted me] [muffled laughter]. . . . Well . . . I got annoyed I said, "I've never told you I have a disability" they're like, "Well, they told us." I'm like, "Well, I never told you that's kinda what it comes down to." . . . I was mad . . . I was mad.*

This unauthorized disclosure of her learning disability was done even though Joy had not disclosed her own disability to the professor yet. Instead of choosing when and how to disclose, or even if she wanted to, the choice was made for her. This was obviously very upsetting for her.

Further, Joy's comments about note-taking occasionally being an unfair practice was also reflected in Maria's comments. Maria noted:

*I've had two note-takers in the past for two different classes . . . so my first experience . . . the note-taker was **amazing** like, beautiful notes but . . . the issue was I relied on their notes too much so I didn't make an effort to go to class and I didn't bother reading the textbook . . . I thought these notes have **all** the answers*

*to everything [laughter] . . . so that definitely . . . harmed me. And then my next experience with a note-taker was . . . I emailed the note-taker, I was like, "Hey, this is my email . . . please like, give me your notes—or this is my . . . my phone number, text me, I can meet you on campus" like, you know? I gave her many options to provide me with her notes and she always dodged me. She said, "OK, sure. I'll do it like, on this day" or, "Oh, sorry I'm running late can we just meet another day?" So this happened . . . over like a month so I literally gave up on her and . . . I don't think I mentioned it to the advisor but I'm pretty sure at the end of the term she still got credit for it.*

In the end, this reliance on her first note-taker, who was a dependable person, compromised her ability to do well in another class where the person taking her notes was not as reliable, leaving her to chase after them and still not getting what she needed. Interestingly, however, while the second person taking her notes for her did not do her job and provide Maria with the assistance that she needed and *required*, she did not make a big deal out of it or report her to the disability office. These experiences left her questioning the note-taking system overall. She added:

*So, I don't really have faith in a note-taking system and I think at the end of the day . . . the more skills I can learn, the better. Even if they're not great I mean, I always want to better myself . . . and I . . . tried using that accommodation to help my studies but . . . it's frustrating . . . it harmed my studies in a way, so even though this is very challenging . . . it's sort of like a decision I've made . . . to just figure it out on my own. . . . I don't know [why I didn't tell the student disability office about my issues] I guess, I . . . can't remember. I think that . . . must have been my first year or maybe my first semester second year. Either I kept hoping that they were gonna, maybe before the day of the exam or something, email me everything.*

Instead of viewing the person as someone harming her in the academic sense, she saw it as almost a challenge for herself. The very fact that she felt that "bettering herself" meant not using any of her accommodations but to try and succeed without them shows just how entrenched ableism and power relations are within postsecondary education. Even when questioned as to why she never reported the person as they clearly did not do the job that

was required of them, she shared that she still had faith that they would do the right thing, which they never did. She continued:

*Or maybe I thought like you know, at least—actually, yeah, this is one of the reasons why I probably didn't mention it to the advisor is like . . . maybe they are busy and at least they're trying to sort of do something for their transcript, you know? And it's like, maybe they're like that to me but maybe they're actually a great note-taker to somebody else, or maybe in the past they've been a great note-taker. So . . . I don't remember the exact reason but, that could have been one of the reasons that maybe...like I definitely wasn't getting anything out of it, it was like more than half of the semester gone so I didn't really want a new note-taker and I . . . really didn't want to get her in trouble. I just didn't care. I felt like you know, maybe one day it'll come back to her [laughter].*

It would seem that for the women with disabilities in this study, the process of registration was overwhelmingly easy and positive for the majority of them. This is encouraging, as the postsecondary environment is often a place where a young adult begins "the process of forming an independent personal and social identity" (Goode, 2007, p. 40) which can sometimes be marred by negative experiences for those with disabilities. In contrast, however, several other women in the study, all with learning challenges, shared their deep frustration and difficulty with this process. While it may be the case that positive steps are being taken to make this process relatively painless, it is clear that there are still areas that require improvement, such as the establishing confidentiality and reliability of the note-taking process.

However, despite some of the negative experiences by the women in this study with regard to the registration process, their experiences dealing with the disability services office and the advisors on campus *after* they were registered were viewed as positive for the majority of the women in this study. In fact, the vast majority of the women noted that their personal experience dealing with Student Disability Services and their disability advisors was positive overall. Additionally, many of these women often

linked these feelings to situations where they felt supported and thankful for the accommodations that disability services provided them, and also felt they had an advocate in their corner ready to come to their aid if they ever needed additional help. Michelle for example, noted:

*Disability Service[s] here on campus is outstanding. They're a phenomenal resource and I've had nothing but good experiences with them. I haven't had the **greatest** experiences with professors and learning disabilities . . . in terms of meeting the accommodations and being sensitive to the needs of myself . . . but because Disability Services is so good and positive and wonderful and is always working to help people, I've been able to overcome those and kinda use them as a good support network to . . . make sure it doesn't get out of hand.*

Further, Marie added:

*Like, I started off at [name of another university, not her current one]. . . . And . . . after that is when I figured out that like—something happened there and then when I changed to [name of university] . . . I found the disability services was—is very helpful and very . . . like, they're very nice. Like, whenever I need anything I could always go there . . . with my exams, they let me write there and they give me help with those, like, I get extra time.*

Michelle and Marie noted the source of constant support and safety that they believed the disability office provided them. They both described it as almost a safety net of sorts, where if things went wrong in their academic lives on campus they knew they had somewhere to turn that could help them figure it out. Interestingly, however, are Marie's comments about them "letting her" write her exams there and "giving her" extra time when in fact it is not a kindness that they are doing her, but rather were giving her what she required to create an equitable learning environment for her to be in.

Jenn as well, also felt a great deal of gratitude when expressing how beneficial the office was for her because of the accommodations she received from them. She noted:

*Yeah . . . definitely [it's really helpful for me to have Student Disability as a service]. . . . It's very helpful for me. . . . so I'm able to get the extra time for the tests, I get time and a half. . . . and I get . . . a quiet place to write my exams, so I*

*write in the office. . . . and, I . . . get the guarantee that I have a copy of any Powerpoint notes . . . that are used.*

While Marie and Jenn's gratitude toward the disability services office came from the extra help they felt they now had via the accommodations made for them, Brooke and Anna's experiences left them grateful toward them in a different way. Namely, the fact that they treated them as a unique individuals and attempted to give them a unique educational experience due to that fact. In essence, they appreciated being asked what they felt they needed so that they could have some input in their own educational experiences. Brooke stated:

*I get Kurzweil on all my exams and I get the extra time that I need and the time is the most important thing for me . . . because I take so long. And . . . I can't even finish some exams within the time that they give me . . . and I'm like, "Oh no . . . five more minutes? . . . like, I can't" . . . and they have to take it but you know . . . it's the ti[me]—and there's nothing else I really need. More time, something's reading it to me slowly so that I don't get confused and . . . I get to do it **my** way and I get to see it, I get—you know?*

Brooke's happiness that she now got to do things the way she wanted is reflected quite clearly in her comments. However, while she was thankful to disability services for treating her as unique individual, she seems to also structure *herself* as something different than others on campus without disabilities. She went on to say:

*And sometimes there's some classes I get . . . notes for and stuff so when I'm there and I'm trying to write notes and he keeps talking and I'm like, "Oh my goodness, where are you?" Normal kids get that too, but they get it just as . . . like, even more like, I'm like completely lost and I'm like, "I can't. I'm just gonna sit here and listen and hopefully this sinks in cause I can't do it anymore . . . I can't even write the right words" and I look back at my notes and I'm like, "That's not an English word . . . like, was I in a French class? . . . what is these n—nouns [sic]?" Like, I was just like, "I don't know what's happening."*

Brooke is juxtaposing herself as a student with a disability to others who are "normal". While on one hand her description of the situation shows her being just like everyone else, she goes on to prove how she felt she is lacking in many ways in comparison to

students without disabilities. While they may have a hard time keeping up with notes as the professor is talking for example, she was completely lost to the point that none of her notes make sense to her. This is an action which has forced her to get note-takers for some of her courses. Further, Brooke's appreciation for the disability services office also came from the fact that they wanted to gain *her* perspective on the things she felt she needed. Brooke continued:

*So my notes even aren't very good because I can't write [light laughter] or like, **read** them after so I . . . get note-takers sometimes for some courses that the prof goes too fast and all these things happen so they've been really good and . . . when I got—after my testing he—I was kind of asked, “What do you think that you need?” and that was one of the best questions . . . cause they actually got my perspective on not . . . like, numbers and everything said about me, but like, what do **I** feel that **I** struggle in?*

Her surprise at their requests were perhaps because no one ever asked her opinion about her own disability before. Rather than just looking at what her testing has revealed about her as a person, they went right to the source and wanted Brooke to share her feelings on what she thought she needed. This was something that left Brooke with positive feelings as it allowed her to really discuss everything she felt in order to improve her experience on campus. She added:

*And I was like, “Oh my goodness! Let me tell you.” . . . Like, “I think I need this, this” . . . you know, they . . . didn't give me some things and they gave me more things and they . . . changed it around a little bit but even just . . . being asked, “What do you think you need?” besides, “Oh you have this LD, you're in specific and written . . .” and all these things that they had, so you need this. They were like, “OK, but what else . . . do you think that you need or what else do you think you don't need from this?” . . . So that was really awesome that they made it personal because LDs are personal and the fact that there—but everyone's LD is a little bit different, right? . . . so it's like, “What do you think? What do you want? What do you don't [sic]?” and it was really awesome to kinda get my perspective in this whole situation, right?*

Much like Brooke's experience, Anna also felt that she could have open discussions with disability services about what would work best for her. This

collaboration was something she really valued and thought was incredibly important for her overall success. She stated:

*They're good [advisors]. . . . They're always, easy to contact, they get back to you very quickly and . . . [My accommodations are sufficient for me] Because when you're meeting with your advisor it's a collaborative process, so they don't just say, "OK, I think this, this, and this should be your accommodations." They're like, "Well, your documentation says **this**, so we have option A, B, or C. Which of these do you think will work? Let's try that for a semester. Get back to me if it's not working."*

Certainly for the women that felt positively about their experiences with the disability services office, part of these positive feelings were due to the belief that they were supported by the individuals in the office and treated like they had some input into the services they were receiving, and that input had *value*. According to McKenzie (2015), the process of testing and in some cases re-testing individuals with disabilities can take a great deal of time, be financially challenging, and discouraging for them. However, it is encouraging to know that once many of these students begin working with disability services as a registered student, their experiences become valuable and special for them.

However, despite so many women having positive experiences with disability services overall, two women noted that they've had both positive and negative experiences with disability services, and two women, Natalie and Joy, felt negatively about their experiences overall. For example, in contrast to Brooke's comments regarding her positive experiences being due, in part, to the fact that she was treated uniquely, her sister Joy felt the exact opposite. During the interview, Joy brought up the fact that when the testing she needed to have done took a long time and impacted her ability to receive her accommodations, the president of the university called the disability services office on her behalf. In Joy's opinion, this was because her family donates a great deal of money to the university and therefore, she received a certain type of treatment that most students



with disabilities do not. In fact, Joy felt that the university could be doing a lot more to help students with disabilities. She stated:

*What could they [the administration] do? Well, they're obviously in my story where [name of the President of the university] had to call down and to get my stuff done. You know, I'm lucky. . . . Like, that's how I look at it. I'm very **lucky** I got that done. . . . Another student will fall through the cracks . . . so, I think maybe . . . more oversight. Umm, maybe more surveys to actually asking [sic] students was this helpful, did you like it, like, making research like this public but students wouldn't get in trouble for saying their honest opinions cause my goodness, I don't like Student Disabilities Services but I **need** it . . . is kinda how I would phrase my experience.*

Joy's strong connection to someone in a position of great power within the university perhaps allowed her to have a bit more control over her university experience than most other students with disabilities on campus. She felt that in order to improve the lives of students with disabilities on campus, changes needed to be made. She continued:

*I could maybe do a streamline of maybe three points for you . . . to write it down. . . . So . . . faster services. . . . So, if their gonna help you help yourself, they need to be fast. . . . I understand they've got a lot of people and that may . . . their administration maybe needs to hire more people, but they need to do that. . . . I know they changed the name from Student Disability Services but it's always going to be called Student Disability Services. . . . [Now it's called] Student Success Centre **South Wing**. . . . But . . . what—[sarcastic tone] if you're special you go down in that room, right? . . . Which . . . students have got to this point where like, I feel like I'm just so like, it doesn't phase me now. . . . Which is fine. . . . my mom told me to think that I'm better than everyone and I like to go with it. Umm, point two what we could do . . . faster services was point one, number two, [slight pause] be understanding that this is all new to these individuals. I—maybe not so much more compassion, but helping them help themselves, like . . . you don't have to read things over with them or like, you know, help them with their homework . . . but, "Hi [name] like, we're gonna help you get your disability but first things first, go get your testing done, I'm gonna send you an email on your steps that you have to do, here you go."*

One of the problems, as Joy noted, is that there are perhaps not enough staff available to deal with the number of students with disabilities on campus (Wilson et al., 2000). In fact, according to Wilson et al. (2000) a great deal of "emphasis is placed on the removal of the architectural barriers without adequate consideration of the 'service-oriented' barriers,

which are most critical to student success" (p. 41). The removal of these types of barriers though, may be causing other unintended problems such as not giving each student registered with the disability office a personalized experience. Joy added:

*Instead of having to go [to] this overwhelming meeting like, I'll disclose a little bit more about my learning disability. I don't have a working memory, do you know what a working memory is? . . . Yeah, so when you tell me everything [makes noise and actions like going over her head] . . . it's gone. . . you know what I mean? So, your meetings mean **nothing** to me. . . . You know they don't . . . tailor the meetings per the person. . . . Which, then you know, you say your unique, your special, you get to come here, but yet, you don't tailor your meetings to them. . . . Right? An email would suffice for me. . . . Tell me these are my steps, like, I can do them. . . . You know, there's no way, I physically can do them, but if you just yell it at me . . . OK, he doesn't yell it . . . but if you tell me, it goes nowhere. . . . I don't remember, I'm like, [breathes in deep] "Oh no." . . . so everyone's different, but they don't do it differently for everyone. . . . There's no **uniqueness** you know? We have these unique learning styles but you know . . . they're not willing to give you the unique experience.*

Joy felt that most students that are using the disability services office receive fairly standard, generic treatment. Basically, every person is treated the same regardless of the disabilities they have. This bothered Joy, because in her opinion, not only was she being placed in a "special area" of the campus, away from her *normal* peers, but they did not take into account how she learns and retains information best.

While a large percentage of the participants in this study felt very positively about their disability advisors, a few of the women wished that their advisors had more of a personal connection with them and more time to spend with them. Brooke for instance, mentioned how she wanted the relationship with her advisor to be a more personal one rather than feeling like they were just there to do a job. She stated:

*I wish that there was a little bit more connection with me and my academic advisor. Umm, who have . . . guides me through these things and tells me to sign up for all these things. I wish that there was more of a personal relationship there and it didn't seem so forced. It felt like he just **had** to say these things to me and I was like, "Oh" but I guess that's more of a personal thing . . .*

In addition, Melanie wished that her advisor had more time to spend with her as he was often very busy. She added:

*The only thing is I wish my advisor wasn't so busy . . . cause I kind of sometimes wish I had somebody who I could bring assignments to who could kind of make sure I'm on track and stuff like that. . . . because my advisor kind of does more general stuff with me, which is helpful but, I wish I had somebody to work more directly with me with making sure my school stuff is on track and . . . kind of stuff like that I guess.*

However, it is often the case that staff who work at disability services are often worn out and overloaded with work (Dutta, Schiro-Geist, & Kundu, 2009) that they simply do not have enough time to devote to every single person that needs them. This work overload may not only cause them to *literally* not have enough time, but it may also have an impact on the *quality* of the relationships that they can have with the students.

Interestingly, however, Natalie did not feel that the responsibility for these service-related problems should be placed on the individuals that work at the office as they do what they can to the best of their ability. Rather, the blame should be placed on the structural and cultural factors that shape experiences along the lines of ableism and the cultural attitudes that reflect an ableist ideology. She added:

*I just wanna make sure . . . that the people that work there are protected. . . . And it's not gonna come back as if they're not . . . being adequate in the services they're providing. . . . I can only protect what I'm saying . . . but I hope that some of the frustration people feel is not being pushed on the people that work there and it's being more so looking at—it's not that they don't wanna help, they don't wanna reach out . . . there's a lot of concern. . . . So I don't like to say blame. . . . But, that is a . . . good question and I think a lot of it is structural. . . . I think a lot of it is culture. And I think it is also about the unknown.*

Thus, the few women that do feel negatively about their own personal experiences noted that faster, more personalized service is something that could greatly improve these encounters. In addition, however, was the recognition that societal barriers perhaps need to change in order for these experiences to improve in any major way. In short then, until

society removes the barriers that persons with disabilities often face, negative experiences will continue to exist for students with disabilities on campus.

Perhaps one way in which these barriers continue to play out in society with regard to disability services in postsecondary school is in the access to the office itself. Some of the women in this study for example, noted that they either did not have very much information about disability services on campus or that they knew nothing at all about the disability services being offered before they began their undergraduate classes. However, in the case of Adelaide and Kelly, two women who did not know about the services offered, this lack of knowledge may be because they were not diagnosed with having disability until they got to postsecondary school. Aside from this though, it seemed that for the other women who noted a lack of previous knowledge about disability services the office itself was somewhat of a secretive affair. Michelle for example, stated:

*[I knew] absolutely nothing [about the services that were provided to students with disabilities]. . . . I made an appointment—so once I gotten [sic] my acceptances from universities I made an appointment—[name of city] was my first choice—made an appointment and met with the advisors at Disability Services . . . and talked to them and saw what services were involved . . . and then once I saw what was offered to me that way it kind of just came together. . . . I don't know [who told me about Disability Services], I guess I just assumed it was a continuation of high school. It must have been my mom . . . who had taken care of all of that.*

It would seem that being recognized and diagnosed as a student with a disability long before attending postsecondary school does not mean greater or more open access to the services that can be provided on campus once a person decides to attend. Once again, the responsibility is placed on the individual to find the office, provide documentation if it has not been provided previously, and figure out how to register and what services they can use.

Further, many of the women who noted issues regarding access and information about disability services were concerned that since services provided for students with disabilities was not really promoted on campus, students who have never been previously diagnosed with a disability or are not connected with someone already using the services may be missing out on a valuable resource that could help their experiences on campus overall. Marie for instance, was one of the women who shared in this concern. She noted:

*Like, maybe if there was a way, cause I bet there are some other people that have learning challenges and don't know. . . . I don't know, cause I had a friend that was like, "I should have done something, but I didn't". . . . So like, she didn't know where to go or where to ask for help. So, maybe if someone kind of reached out and made it more accessible like, to tell, cause I wouldn't have known about Disability Services unless that lady told me. . . . Which she did, the . . . It was . . . a doctor . . . she's like in [name of city] somewhere . . . . And then I knew where to . . . go, she told me where to go. . . . And told me where it was. . . . Otherwise I would have [not known] . . . Yeah, I feel like it's not obvious enough [or open enough for others to access it].*

Similarly, Michelle agreed:

*I think you have to go out of your way. . . . Disability Services is not necessarily promoted. You sort of have to be **in** with the disability crowd . . . to get access to it. . . . And even within Disability Services there's a ton of . . . like scholarships, bursaries, grants, things like that that you have access to that are not necessarily promoted. I can think of an example where if you qualify for OSAP you are eligible for a technology grant. So, if you require assistive technology like I do and you get one dollar of OSAP at the very least, you qualify for X number of dollars from the government to buy your technology. Now, in my first two years of university I didn't qualify for OSAP so this door was not open to me. . . . it also wasn't . . . promoted to me, I didn't know about it, but then when I did qualify for OSAP, people just assumed I had known about it.*

The fact that Disability Services is not really advertised throughout campus highlights a few important issues regarding ableism and power. The first of these issues comes from societal beliefs that those with disabilities are not as "smart" or as "good" as other people. In a university environment, those in positions of power may wish to keep those with

disabilities hidden away so as not to impact this façade of normality. Michelle went on to describe a situation in her own experience:

*And it took an unfortunate incidence of . . . me dropping my laptop and the . . . the Kurzweil program breaking off the memory stick in order to me [sic] to realize that this was available to me. I . . . went in to see the advisor and I was like sobbing my face off and I was **so** upset because it was near exams and I didn't have this program and I didn't wanna keep having to go to the library at all hours of the day to do reading and he was like, "Well, why don't you just buy your own?" and I said, "Well I did, it was six grand and I paid for it out of pocket" and he was like, "N—no, no, stop" and so he explained about the grants to me and stuff. But if I hadn't you know, went to see him, like I probably would've just bought another one . . . without . . . thinking about it.*

Further, Anna added:

*If you're already connected with Student Disability, then your advisor will kinda tell you, "You know, you can ask for this" or something, but if you're trying to do it on your own, the university is not very helpful. . . . [but if you're somebody who is not registered] You're kinda S.O.L.*

Issues with the accessibility of the office has also been reported by Marshak et al. (2010) (see also, Lightener, Kipps-Vaughan, Schulte, & Trice, 2012). It seems that once again, the responsibility is only on the student with the disability. Thus, in order to help themselves be successful they need to get their information from others who are *like* them rather than the university being responsible to promote the services and opportunities that they can take advantage of while on campus. It again becomes a question of the façade of normality: those that are not deemed to fit the criteria by those in power must go it alone in their postsecondary experiences if they want to be successful.

Further, a very small number of women in this study were told about disability services on campus while they were still in high school through people like learning support teachers (LST). Melanie for example, stated:

*I pretty much knew everything [about the services provided on campus to students with disabilities] from [abbreviated name of transition event], from attending that one presentation . . . and a **little** bit from my LST [Learning Support Teacher] in*

*high school . . . so I knew that I would get accommodations . . . and I knew that they would have to be a little bit, different from high school. I didn't know exactly what they would be . . . until I met with my advisor. . . . [abbreviated name of transition event is] through your high school . . . So you don't have to go . . . but like, my LST told me about it.*

While so few women in this study were informed about disability services prior to beginning their undergraduate degrees, this sort of information is so important, particularly for students with learning challenges. According to Lightener et al. (2012), being informed "about disability services provided students with a better sense of how ODS could support them academically" (p. 154). It would seem that students with disabilities are somewhat at the mercy of those around them. If during their secondary school experiences, they are working with teachers who are informed themselves about the services that could be provided to students with disabilities, then it may be more likely that the students will be given that information and better prepared to begin their postsecondary academic life. However, if the teachers or other secondary school personnel are not as well informed, this could mean far less preparation and a greater chance of frustration when they do arrive on campus.

However, despite the fact that some of the women had little or no information about disability services others felt that the office itself lived up to their expectations.

Michelle for example, noted:

*Yes [they have lived up to expectations]. . . . they kinda provide you—I remember them providing like a long laundry list of services available and things they can do. . . . but it's up to you to access them. . . . So, as problems arised [sic] or as you know, I needed help with something I could kind of go to the appropriate channels and it's met all my needs . . . aside from that one textbook incident that I had mentioned earlier, everything has been absolutely perfect on their end. . . . I've never had a problem . . . ever.*

While she felt that disability services did live up to any expectations she may have had, Michelle also recognized that access to what is offered depends solely on the individual

with the disability. Therefore, if that individual knows where to go and what to ask for, the opportunities are seemingly endless to receive a variety of accommodations and services.

Further, Adelaide agreed that it did live up to her expectations, even though they were not that high to begin with. She felt that beyond what they were already offering and she was already receiving there was not much else that could be done for a person with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. She added:

*[pause] Yeah [it does live up to my expectations]. Umm, I wasn't really expecting much . . . to be honest. . . . the main disappointment was that there's no type of community on campus of people of who go through that thing. . . . Through that ADHD or . . . like I said before, like support groups, but in terms of like, Service Disabilities, [sic] I was expecting time and a half, I was expecting the no distraction, there's not much else you can really do . . . for someone with ADHD who's taking a test. . . . Not that I'm aware of. . . . Yeah, there was a list of things but . . . most of it didn't apply to me. . . . A lot of it was like . . . technological aids . . . or maybe note-takers . . . stuff like that.*

It seems that with expectations being low to begin with, that Adelaide would receive extended time in a distraction-free area, meeting those expectations does not become a great challenge. In her opinion, what is currently being done is all that *can* be done and therefore, any previous expectations she had are being met.

With regard to expectations, Maria and Joy felt that their expectations were being met on *some* occasions and at other times, were not. Maria for instance, felt that when she first accessed disability services issues with her advisor at the time did her a great disservice. Since that time, however, this opinion has changed somewhat with the new advisor that she has been dealing with. She stated:

*I would say . . . definitely at the beginning **no** [it did not live up to my expectations], it did more harm than good. Umm, I would say now . . . it's living up to my expectations and I think even if it doesn't live up to my expectations now, I sort of see that maybe it could live up to a different student's expectations but, at the beginning it was definitely nothing like that but . . . I mean, I just think*



*having better dialogue with my . . . advisor has helped a lot . . . so, yeah I guess it's starting to.*

Joy's feelings regarding her expectations being met are a bit harsher than those of her peers. She noted the differences in her secondary schooling experiences compared to her postsecondary schooling experiences in relation to support services. In Joy's opinion, her secondary experiences consisted of more care and attention with regards to her needs. In university on the other hand, the process is much more standardized, bureaucratic, and factory-like in that students with disabilities are filtered through a production line of testing, disclosure letters, and pre-packaged accommodations and, when this process is complete, they move on to the next student. Joy noted:

*[breathes out lightly] Yes [it has lived up to my expectations] and no. . . . in high school, like in that environment, you know, you have a teacher and it's a **very** small classroom . . . right? So you really, like they'll sit with you, and they'll be like, "What don't you get, what do you need a little extra help in?" With Student Disability Services, you basically just go there to get your letters to hand them to your prof. . . . There's no like, "How are you doing?" . . . Like, you know . . . once you have your testing done, they basically are like, [slaps hands together in a washing hands motion] "Have a nice day". . . . That's all they do, and make sure you get your technology.*

These experiences with disability services have clearly been frustrating for Joy as she feels that she is not being treated like a unique human being but rather, as a product in an assembly line.

While the majority of the women who discussed specific issues regarding the disability office were those that felt their overall experiences dealing with the office were negative or lukewarm, two women who rated their experiences with the disability office on campus as positive, Kelly and Anna, mentioned personal experiences with them that illustrated the opposite. Specifically, the majority of the issues discussed were in regards to a lack of consistency in information and people, a lack of information given in general,

fighting to get the information required, and feeling that the disability office was putting all of the blame and responsibility for things like exam scheduling errors on the students themselves rather than attempting to help them. Kelly for example, stated:

*No [I don't feel like SDS told me everything that was available to me]. . . . Because even . . . beforehand, students seemed to have different information about it. After I was talking to somebody else . . . who had knowledge about the Disability Centre he was talking about some kid who was given a computer program that read to him and auditory learning is one of my more . . . it is more strong than reading, so I asked the Disability Coordinator—guy who's dealing with me, I'm like, "What's with this program that reads to you? How do I get it? What is it?" and he seemed to know nothing about it, or was like, "Look online, Google or . . . ", whatever. Anyways, that's just inconsistency of information, but that . . . doesn't surprise me here because nobody seems to know the same information . . . . Not even the professors. Can't even . . . give out the right policies.*

Kelly described the frustration she felt at the inconsistency of information given from one student with disabilities to the next. In her case, she learned from another student accessing disability services that there were other technologies that he was using which would have been incredibly beneficial for her learning. However, she was not told that this particular program was even available for her to use.

Similarly, Maria shared her experience of asking someone at disability services how she would go about obtaining proper documentation on her transcript for the volunteering she was doing on campus. Unfortunately, she was not given an answer but told to go somewhere else on campus that could help her. However, when she got there, they passed her off to another office to get answers. She added:

*But anyway my second year I got involved on campus and . . . in the community. I volunteer in the community at the [name of city] Youth Centre, so that was great. . . . And then . . . on campus I volunteered at the Academic . . . oh wait, what's it called . . . it's something to do with like Plagiarism. Umm, what's the office called, oh, Academic Integrity Office. . . . So that was a great experience too so then my second year . . . I wanted to document that in the co-curricular transcript so I asked Disability Services well, just general questions like, "Oh, like, who do I go to about that?" or like, "How can I put it on there?", stuff like*

*that. Well, they told me to go to . . . the Academic Advising Centre and then I thought, "OK well **this** time, since I always just walk in, this time I'll do it online." So, I booked the appointment online, I waited like three days or something for my appointment, I finally show up and then I showed up just for them to tell me, "Well actually, for the co-curricular transcript you have to go to Student Success Centre." So, at that point I was like forget it, I don't want to do this anymore.*

It would seem that both women were left disappointed in the inconsistent information coming from a service that they believed should be a reliable, knowledgeable place for them to go on campus. Instead, the information that Kelly and Maria needed was omitted in one case and ignored in the other. This of course, made the women so frustrated that they eventually gave up. In Kelly's case, she asked the appropriate person for more information and none was provided for her stopping her attempts there. Further, Maria also stopped asking about getting a co-curricular transcript because she just simply could not get a straight answer. Unfortunately, it would seem that some of the women in this study shared in these feelings as well.

Another specific issue discussed by the women in the study had to do with the exam process. Specifically, issues arose for some women around the inequities of this process and the incongruity of proctors in the testing rooms themselves. Anna for example, noted the lack of equity that can arise for students with disabilities when they write their exam in a different place than the rest of their peers who do not have disabilities. She noted that while they are given extra time, some of this extra time can be wasted simply waiting to get clarification about a question from their professors who are not often easily accessible during the exam. She stated:

*Well, I don't like the fact that we're in the basement of [name of campus building] so if we need clarification or anything from the professor we have to like, tell the proctor that we have a question and they have to try to call the professor who may or may not be able to answer the call, depending on how many proctors there are for . . . wherever they are, and then they get back to you eventually and you might*

*have forgotten what your actual question was by then. . . . I've actually had to wait over an **hour** for the prof to be able to get back to me . . . for a question on an exam [and I would still only get the time and a half]. . . . So like, you try to go on to other questions . . . but if you have questions about a lot of it then . . . you're kinda . . . screwed [laughter].*

In addition, Michelle also voiced her frustration about not only inconsistent proctors in the exam rooms but also a lack of sensitivity from these proctors about what the students with disabilities need, perhaps because they also lack awareness and knowledge about disabilities themselves. For Michelle, while it may have been the same group of a dozen people or so who are exam proctors for the disability services office, there is a lack of consistency in the understanding of assistive technologies and what students with disabilities require from one proctor to another. She added:

*More consistent proctors in Disability Services . . . does that count, is that kinda . . . what you're getting at? . . . no it's the . . . same group of maybe ten or twelve people. . . . But none of them they're . . . employed through Work Study . . . they get training on how to proctor exams and how to use the assistive technology but there's no consistency and there's not necessarily . . . I don't want to say sensitivity training but they don't always respect—or they sort of forget why you're there and so they'll say like, "Well, can't you just do it without the computer until we get it fixed?" No, because if I could do it without the computer, I would be with the rest of my class . . . kinda thing. . . . like, it's annoying because you're constantly having to judge who you're seeing and—you get used to the faces, but it's more of an annoyance . . . and it's not really inhibiting my success . . . it's just . . . a stressor . . . [I] guess?*

This idea of proctors being unknowledgeable is one that was shared in Hadley's (2007) study comprised of university students with learning disabilities in their first year of study. For example, the participants felt that "the student-proctors were not familiar with the necessary courses" (p. 12) and in addition, they expressed their dissatisfaction with the proctors being senior students (2007). If for example, more proctors in the exam testing rooms were more knowledgeable about the courses that the students are writing the exams in, they would be less of a need to wait so long for the actual professor to

appear. In addition, if they also better understood the students with disabilities that they are supervising in terms of what their needs are for the exams that they are taking, it would perhaps help those students feel that people care enough about them to give them the same courtesy and equity that students without disabilities have. This may give them a better outlook on their experiences overall.

Lastly, a few of the women expressed concerns that the blame and responsibility of everything is always placed on their shoulders by those in the disability office. Both Joy and Amélie for instance, both made innocent mistakes regarding the schedule of exams. The disability office on campus requires those with disabilities to notify them of their upcoming exams weeks in advance and according to the opinions of these women, employ a very rigid policy if it is not done in exactly the way that is asked. Joy for example, noted how the extra responsibilities that students with disabilities have sometimes overwhelms them. She stated:

*Well, this talk reminds me how much I hate . . . Student Disability Services [laughter]. . . it's just essentially, they just kinda do nothing. I know that sounds **absolutely** terrible . . . and I . . . apologize, well, they'll never hear it so . . . You know, like, they don't do anything. . . . That's what it basically comes down to. They don't provide you services, they won't go contact your teachers if you need help. . . . You know? . . . I've never asked but . . . I can't see it happening. . . . If you got an online course, you have to email your prof your . . . disability papers. . . . You know, it's . . . oh **you** have to disclose, **you** have to do it.*

Rather than make things easier for them to succeed within an already challenging environment, it would seem that the opposite is true. Students with disabilities have to essentially take sole responsibility and accountability for themselves. Unlike students without disabilities, in order to be successful, students with disabilities must disclose and they must find ways to deal with issues with their professors in addition to all of the duties of just being a university student. In short, they must do it all. Joy went on to say:

*You know, it'd be so much easier if they looked at my schedule, hired someone just to put it all in and I could just go there and take my—you know, they make students that are already marginalized within a school system their **entire lives** you know? Now you have to take seven extra steps. . . . Like, I didn't register for one of my . . . exams on time, obviously, I was—so many courses I just . . . was busy studying for it. . . . I had to . . . appeal it, in writing. A long email explaining why and . . . they were like, "You need to provide a death certificate, a health certificate, or something" and I was like, "You gotta be kidding me, I didn't miss the **exam** I just wanna write it! My prof already knows like, it's not hard for them just to walk something over . . . or email it to you." . . . But they make it seem like, that, like the **sky is falling** if you don't do it on time. They make you feel even worse.*

In Joy's case, she forgot to notify the office that she had an exam coming up within the time frame that she needed to. Following the realization of her mistake she had to give an appeal in writing not because she missed the exam, but because she missed the notification deadline. Further, Joy felt that these rigid policies continued the marginalization of students with disabilities who have been marginalized by the school system all their lives. In essence, students with disabilities must push against university systems which continue to hold them down, making it that much more difficult for them to achieve any real success.

Amélie also shared her experience of accidentally scheduling two of her exams on the wrong date and time. This was obviously unintentional on her part, yet instead of recognizing this fact she was met with a great deal of blame not only from those at the disability office but her professor as well. In her opinion, the confrontation following the discovery of her mistake was a threatening and uncomfortable one for her to go through. She stated:

*[I have not had any interactions that were] Positive, no. . . . No. . . . What was not positive? It was the fact that I have this problem that . . . I sometimes forget things and . . . I . . . scheduled an exam at the wrong time, at the wrong date twice . . . and the manager and the coordinator and another person they were sending me emails regarding that and then I had . . . meeting with my coordinator regarding that and it was not positive at all, it was threatening. . . . Yeah . . . that, they're*

*gonna cancel my . . . services. That I'm not gonna be more welcome there. . . . It was the fact that I scheduled twice exam at the wrong date at the wrong time. And they said that they were spending—uh, there's proctors who come, they just waste money on me. That's what my . . . coordinator said. . . . Yeah, it was a mistake it's not just I intentionally decided to do that.*

At the follow-up meeting after her initial interview, Amélie further clarified her statement. She added:

*I'd like to say that it was not only threatening, it was discomforting, and it was unpleasant with the fact how coordinator was talking to me. He was talking to me in the way that it was all **my** fault, as I'm a full [sic] responsible and I do not believe with this situation because . . . in different occasion I actually, try to communicating [sic] with the teacher when it comes to schedule and . . . appointment to do . . . the test at the Disability Services and I failed to do so. And also I talked to . . . professor she also was blaming on me and I believe that the fact of them, coordinator and the teacher, blaming on me, it is not good.*

Thus, it is clear that the issues these women have faced with disability services are troubling. Although the majority of women in this study noted a variety of positive experiences and interactions with the disability office, the specific negative experiences shared by other women like the various inconsistencies and blame as noted above cannot be ignored. While it is surely the case that the disability office only wants what is best for students with disabilities, some instances here certainly illustrate that more work needs to be done. Part of the problem may be the structure of *normal* in society, and how those without disabilities and even the persons with disabilities themselves structure disability in relation to normality.

### *Normality*

The social constructions of normality, namely those of *sameness* as being more desirable than *difference*, have perhaps led women with disabilities to face even greater challenges in their daily lives than those brought on by the double discrimination (Asch, Rousso, & Jeffries, 2001). It would seem that these attitudes have had a profound impact

on the participants in this study. In fact, the vast majority of the women in this study expressed a desire to be normal or "fit in" with others in society, as they recognized that they were different in some way than the rest, either by how they were or might be perceived by others or how *they perceived themselves* in relation to others on campus. In fact, 75% of the women in this study made comments structuring themselves and their desires in relation to the norm, with 11 of these women being those that identified as having a learning challenge. This is especially interesting, as Goodrich and Ramsay (2013) discovered that while "people with physical disabilities tend to feel exclusion more strongly than those with learning disabilities" (p. 84), they do not have the same kinds of pressures as those with invisible disabilities because they have to deal with their disability in a straightforward manner. Thus, "attitudes of people with learning disabilities tend to align more closely with the medical model (wanting to hide or fix the disability if possible)" (2013, p. 85).

In fact, some of the students in this study relied on what Barnard-Brak et al. (2010) called "downplaying a disability status" (p. 420). According to the authors, this downplay involves the desire for students with disabilities "not to disclose their disability status at all if possible or alternatively to minimize one's disability in order to pass as able-bodied" (2010, p. 420). This may be because for "people with hidden disabilities, revealing one's disability status meant movement from a non-stigmatized identity to a stigmatized one" (Olney & Brockelman, 2005, p. 87) while on the other hand, a person with a physical disability, is moving "from a more stigmatized to a less stigmatized identity" (Olney & Brockelman, 2005, p. 87). Therefore, these feelings and internalizations of the norm may have had a direct and lasting impact on the women with learning challenges in this study. Anita for example, stated:



*I just feel like . . . a lot of people . . . with disabilities . . . they just want to feel normal. They don't want to feel like they're different or like they're weird or like they need extra help.*

Similarly, in relation to the basement room on campus, Joy added:

*I don't think a lot of people have keys. Well, cause, I don't have a key cause that's where the special people would probably go, right? . . . And sometimes you don't wanna be class—like, do you know what I mean?*

Reflected in both Anita and Joy's comments is an underlying desire to be normal and fit the normative standards of society. Anita noted simply, that men and women with disabilities "just want to feel normal" and not ascribed the label as something strange in any way. At the same time, Joy noted that her and many others may not have keys to access the basement room on campus, the room specially designed for students with disabilities, because people with disabilities do not want to be classified as "different" and that room is "where the special people go." There is a recognition as well as a need by both women to distance themselves from disability because the standards of society have labeled normal as "good" and disability as "bad", a distance which may be easier for them to get as both women have a learning challenge, a disability which may allow them more opportunities to look and act normal than a person with a visible disability would have. According to Goodrich and Ramsay (2013), due to the fact that visible disabilities are simply that—visible— people with visible impairments are more likely to characterize themselves as a person with a disability. A person with a learning challenge, however, "may feel 'normal' in many life situations which do not involve cognitive prowess (family life, sports, social events, etc.), potentially providing more incentive to 'pass' as non-disabled" (2013, p. 75). It would seem that both women share an understanding that being perceived as typical, ordinary, and the same as everyone else in their postsecondary

environments is much more desirable than being seen as something that does not belong and treated as such.

Further, while some of the women just wanted to fit into the normative standards of an elite postsecondary environment, a few of the women also expressed that they did not want people to think of them as less intelligent or "dumb". Marie for example, stated:

*Umm, [long pause] [talking to professors is challenging for me] cause I . . . never know what to say. . . . like, I guess if I say something that's kind of, I don't know, like, dumb or something and they see me in class, they'll like—they might remember me . . . yeah, so kinda just, I don't know. I don't like [to], look dumb [sic] . . . I guess.*

Similarly, Anna revealed a desire to remove the words "special needs" from the sign above the door where all students with disabilities write their exams. Presumably, this is because there is an association with disability as not only *bad*, but lacking in intelligence as well.

*I would still like them [Student Disability Services] to cut the . . . sign on their door in half. It says, "Special Needs Testing Room." I'd like them to cut off . . . the special needs part and just put "Testing Room."*

According to Brueggemann et al. (2001), people with learning challenges are particularly susceptible to the normalizing standards of society. In this particular case, the "sorting" occurs with regard to testing rooms. Sorting and creating a hierarchy of inequality by placing those with accommodations that require more time to complete examinations into their own "special rooms" (as both Joy and Anna mentioned), clearly illustrates how those in positions of power are continuing to perpetuate the ideal that the belief that Other is somehow a deficiency and not valued in postsecondary education. Further, it would seem that for Brooke, being able to *prove* to others that she was intelligent and successful in academia diminished some of the constructions of Otherness which portray those with disabilities as less intelligent:

*Yeah, I think . . . not really now when I can look at them and saying you know, "I'm in university and working on two degrees and a diploma in five years and I've been working really hard" they think better of me **now** . . . but even in high school and elementary school and a lot of those times, I felt—I didn't wanna say it [that I had a disability] to people who didn't really matter, I didn't talk about it and now I'm a lot more open with it because I feel like people now can see that I've done well . . . or I'm **doing** well, right? . . . So they're more like . . . absecting [sic] [accepting] of it . . .*

It is particularly striking that in Brooke's opinion, now that she was succeeding within the postsecondary environment, an environment that has been constructed as an ostentatious fairground of sorts (Hibbs & Pothier, 2006, Jung, 2011), she felt that people are more accepting of her and her disability. This, however, is juxtaposed by her postsecondary experiences. Before being seen as the person who was accepted into university and working on multiple degrees, she was simply constructed negatively like many others who have a disability. Ultimately, this construction led her to hide it more frequently from those around her because she did not have anything at the time that would contradict those constructions.

Being constructed as *normal*, particularly for the women in this study with learning challenges, was viewed as especially important. The fear of being regarded as less intelligent for example, led some of them to strive for this normality. These constructions of *Other* versus *normal* are particularly detrimental to these women and others with disabilities, as it continues to perpetuate a hierarchy where persons with disabilities are placed on the bottom, always looking upwards at the ivory tower that is postsecondary education's elite community of *normal* citizens. Unfortunately, additional hierarchies also seem to exist within and between invisible and visible disabilities as well.

*Perceptions of Invisible versus Visible Disabilities in Postsecondary Education*

Society's perceptions of people or groups can be confining and quite damaging. According to Tyjewski (2006) for example, the majority of "people are presumed to be heterosexual and either male or female and non-disabled unless one bears some stereotypical characteristic, such as carrying a white cane or having a 'limp wrist' " (pp. 109-110). While it is true that those with all types of disabilities are still attempting to tackle the "social exclusion" that exists (Erten, 2011, p. 111) simply because of their disability, it may also be true that people with visible and invisible disabilities experience this exclusion in different ways. People with physical disabilities for example, may simply tolerate their "second-class citizen status" (Fleitas, 2000; Green, 2003; Juvonen & Graham, 2001; as cited in Trammell, 2009, p. 25) whereas those with more invisible disabilities, like learning challenges, may fear the "unintended exposure" which may occur upon the discovery of their disability (Goodrich & Ramsay, 2013, p. 5). Thus, perhaps in a direct reflection of these societal beliefs, perceived differences between people with physical disabilities and people with learning challenges were noted by the women in this study. In fact, 15 out of the 16 participants believed that there were differences between those with physical disabilities and learning challenges in many ways including societal attitudes and reactions toward them and also in how they are treated by others. Notably, out of all 16 participants, only one woman with a learning challenge (Adelaide), felt that these differences did not exist. Further, many of the women noted that people with physical disabilities are regarded by others either in one of two ways: they are either more susceptible to judgment and stigmatization than those with learning challenges, or that people are more sensitive and sympathetic to it because their disability is obvious to every person who looks at them.

The concept of "visibility" was often mentioned as the main reason for these judgments and differences. Interestingly, it was mainly the women with learning challenges who noted these observations. For instance, Anita stated:

*I feel like when you have a physical disability people can usually see it, you know, if you can't walk you usually have a wheelchair . . . people can see it, it's there . . . So, I feel like people are more open to it and they're not blatantly going to say to your face that you aren't disabled or you don't have any type of disability. They may say it behind your back but that's not something people will generally say. I find that when it's something you can't see, people are more willing to say it that it's maybe not there. . . . Just because it's hard for people to understand what they can't see.*

Further, Maria noted:

*I do [think there is a difference in attitude on campus toward someone who has a physical disability versus someone who has a learning challenge]. . . . I think I just didn't—think for instance for me with my peers . . . I think they wouldn't believe it or respect because they just don't see it whereas like a physical disability like . . . if I were to tell somebody and then I have somebody with a physical disability tell somebody, then they would be like, "Well yeah, I believe this guy, look it", right? So I feel like they just wouldn't be able to see it so I just don't think they would . . . like, respect it or make it valuable or acknowledge it.*

Anita and Maria draw attention to *visibility* and *invisibility* in important ways. For both of these women, having a disability that is more visible in nature is immediately attributed sympathy, more understanding, and even a certain kind of respect that is not given to people who have disabilities that are hidden from view. The perceptions of invisible disabilities, however, at least according to these women, are that they are fictional and can be easily remedied with a little hard work and effort. This is unfortunate, as these negative perceptions have certainly impacted both of these women in hurtful ways, as it is clear to them that society views them and other people with learning challenges as not working hard enough to overcome the obstacles they face.

However, while women in this study noted that people with visible disabilities are rarely doubted (in regards to the fact that they have an actual disability) and often given more understanding and compassion, having a visible disability may also mean that they are perceived as being less *capable*. Anna noted:

*Probably [people on campus treat students who have physical disabilities differently than they treat students who have learning challenges], because it's easier to notice a physical disability so you often don't find out right away that someone has a learning challenge . . . so you have already gotten used to treating them just like everybody else, whereas if somebody walks by with a white cane, you know the person's blind, so you've already gotten used to treating them as blind. . . . one particular friend . . . has this thing about—he has to open his own doors because he is blind and people assume he can't do it for himself . . . so they're always like, opening doors and everything for him, and he's like, "No. I can do it." . . . Like, they assume he's less capable.*

Anna used the example of "getting used to" treating those with learning challenges as *normal* citizens and people with physical disabilities as *abnormal* citizens. Until a person with a learning challenge is discovered or found out as a person with a disability, they blend into normal society. However, the immediate construction of those with physical disabilities is that they are somehow *less than* everyone else: less capable, less normal, or even less independent. Similarly, it is only until an invisible disability is uncovered when that person is described as lacking something, but lacking in a different way: effort and hard work. These ideas are also reflected in further commentary by Anna:

*[pause] I think people are more readily accepting of the specific accommodations that physical disabilities require, so it's really easy to see why somebody who is paralyzed from the waist down would need a wheelchair. It's not easy to see why I might need notes taken for me. . . . [People might have that reaction toward people with learning challenges] Probably just because it's not something that occurs naturally, like, it's an extra step. . . . They don't—just, think about it.*

Therefore, as Anna's comments also indicate, a visible disability is often constructed as something that cannot be controlled, whereas an invisible disability is often seen as something controllable within the person themselves. In effect, in addition to being

perceived as less capable, a visible disability is also more readily accepted as a *disability* than those with invisible disabilities.

Michapentimento as well, seemed to agree with Anna's sentiments that those with physical disabilities may require more help than others because they may be less able to do it themselves. In Michapentimento's view, treating a person with a physical disability differently by giving them more help is simply a step toward equal and equitable treatment. She noted:

*Yeah [people on campus treat people who have physical disabilities differently than they treat people with learning disabilities]. . . . it depends on what it is. . . . I think . . . like I mentioned already, it depends if it's like, an invisible one or if it's—cause umm, like I would—I look just like anybody else would whereas somebody in a wheelchair would look like, “Let me get the door for you” or something. Like, I treat people differently . . . with a physical disability cause it's like, “Oh, let me . . . hold the door for you.” And . . . it's something that's unconscious . . . whereas you try to treat everybody fairly and equally, but sometimes treating everybody equally and the same isn't fair. . . . Because I mean . . . you should hold the door for somebody who's struggling to try to get the door . . . who's in a wheelchair, right? . . . unless they don't want your help. . . . So, I don't know.*

Further, implicit in the statements by these women is the view that they are perhaps *more* capable because their disability was not so easily uncovered. However, while those with more visible disabilities tended to try and compensate for these perceptions "by projecting an image of competence" (Olney & Brockelman, 2005, p. 86), the perceptions of those with visible disabilities as simultaneously incapable and *accepted* has severe implications for those with invisible disabilities. Some of these implications for instance, may be the fact that others may not believe their disability is real, feeling like the disability is their fault, and issues with others seeing them as having a disability, but also being an adequate and competent person (2005).

Michelle for example, admitted that while she personally has never felt excluded or discriminated against, she realized that the invisibility of her learning challenge may cause greater intolerance and less understanding by those in society compared to those with visible disabilities. She stated:

*I do [think there is a difference in attitude on campus toward students with physical disabilities versus students with learning challenges]. And I think . . . that holds true just for society . . . in general. I think it's easier to see somebody with a physical disability and to see . . . what their problem is and you can sort of create this schema of what you would expect their limitations to be or what you can sort of do. You know, somebody who's like, blind let's say, you know, can't read a piece of paper or whatever, so you would have to help them accommodate that. If you can't see how I read, you don't know that the problem exists. Umm, if you don't see how I process information, you're never gonna know.*

Interestingly, Michelle alluded to the societal construction of disability as well as the importance of proof. According to Michelle, people already have ideas and constructions for what a person with a physical disability can and cannot do. Not only that, but the visibility of the disability also helps in cementing these ideas. Because we can see that people with physical disabilities may need help, we are more readily willing to give it away. On the other hand, people with invisible disabilities have to show that their disability is real, leading many people to question whether it is there at all. Michelle continued:

*People are generally a little bit more accepting of physical disabilities. . . . accepting in terms of like . . . hold on, I wanna say this differently. [pause] They're a little more **sensitive** to disa—physical disabilities because they can **see** it. They're not necessarily **tolerant** of it or respectful of it, but they can see it. . . . And that cause and effect. . . . Whereas they can't see that with a learning disability . . . . Does that make sense? . . . I have never really felt discriminated against. . . . I've never felt **excluded**. . . . like I have friends that I talk to and have great relationships with and that doesn't seem to bother them . . . or affect my . . . relationship other than I don't see them before I go to the exam.*

It would seem that Michelle has both an understanding and realization of the fact that disability in general is not exactly tolerated on a university campus or anywhere in



society. However, consistent with research by Higbee et al. (2010), echoed in the comments by many of these women is the sense that those people with disabilities which are easily seen are constructed as being more readily accepted by society as a person who requires more help and compassion because they are less "able" than others.

This sense of "internalized ableism" (Kumari-Campbell, 2008, p. 155; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012, p. 43) is also shown in Amélie and Joy's comments where it was clear that societal beliefs about disability have impacted their university experiences and life in general. Unfortunately for Amélie, this internalization has resulted in a recognition of a certain pecking order within the disability community (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012) as well as an attempt to dissociate certain disabilities from others (Kumari-Campbell, 2008) by explaining the different ways that they are viewed negatively in society. For instance, Amélie explained that while people with learning challenges are viewed as less intelligent, those with visible disabilities are viewed as not fully productive within society:

*Oh yes there's a very big difference [in how people react to people who have learning challenges versus people who have physical disabilities]. . . . Well, a person with learning disability they just say, "oh you are retarded" . . . and person with physical disability say, "Oh, you're not good for nothing because you cannot do this, you cannot do that" . . . so, you know? It is . . . when it comes to employment, it might not be too difficult as long as the person will be using manual work [sic], but for example, if that person, like with learning disability wants to be a lawyer or wants to be . . . in a social worker and you know, has to write, cause you always have to write everything, and what if you don't remember what you wrote? That's gonna big problem with the boss . . . so person with learning disability [sic] basically have to always have . . . reminder of what has written and have like copy in order not to forget and keep everything . . . in check . . . . But person with disability [sic], you know, can . . . remember everything but again cannot work at the same time pace as person with learning disability [sic] . . . yeah.*

Similarly, Joy also differentiated those with learning challenges from those with physical disabilities into two separate categories of disability, namely intelligence verses physical

competence. In her opinion, those with physical disabilities have the intelligence but not the physical capability, whereas those with learning challenges lack some of the same intellect even though they are physically able. She stated:

*One hundred percent [the reaction is different with a student who has a learning challenge versus a student who has a physical disability]. . . . Cause the disability is right there. . . . It's right in front of you. And with a learning disability, like they're not challenged like, academically like . . . please write this paper within two hours . . . when, it may take them time to get there and how to write the paper . . . like physically how to write it . . . but up here [points to head] . . . . So, it's—they've got, they—you know what I mean? . . . But when you're looking at a learning disability, everything else is OK, it's up here [points to head]. . . . they're all extreme disabilities, you're talking like apples and oranges right now . . . . You know what I mean? . . . Like, I can walk myself to the exam, I can sit down and I can type it out . . . but . . . someone more of a physical disability might have a struggle getting **to** there, having a struggle to sit down, having a struggle to type it, but it's all up here [points to head] and it's all organized, it's all pretty and they can use those big words . . . when I, can't do that but I can get myself there. . . . I'd say it's apples and oranges.*

However, it is interesting that both Amélie and Joy, a woman with a physical disabilities and a woman with a learning challenge respectively, have made a very clear distinction between those with invisible disabilities and those with visible disabilities in terms of one being more physically apt and the other being more mentally proficient. As stated earlier, some of the other women with learning challenges in this study also felt that they were regarded as less smart than their peers. However, in direct contrast to the beliefs of these women, other researchers have shown that people with invisible disabilities believed others saw them as smart, a statement that those with visible disabilities did not share (Olney & Brockelman, 2005). Thus, it would seem that negative social constructions of both visible and invisible disabilities have impacted the outlook, internal beliefs, and understandings for many of the women in this study.

Further, in addition to identifying *visibility* as a chief factor in their perception of difference many of the women, whether they had a physical disability or learning

challenge, often expressed feelings of concern and, perhaps most interestingly, *sympathy* for the women that did not share their same disability. For example, some of the women who had a physical disability stated that they felt things would be even more difficult for people who had learning challenges, and vice versa. Jenn for instance, expressed her feelings that those with learning challenges, like herself, may "have it more easily" than those with physical disabilities because they have a *choice* whether or not to disclose to others, whereas those with physical disabilities do not. According to Jenn, this automatic disclosure may have a significant impact on their social lives:

*I think people with learning disabilities . . . like when you're talking to them you often can't tell. I think they . . . might have it more easily because . . . if they don't want someone to know that they have a disability . . . they just don't tell them. . . . But, if someone has a physical disability, they could be being judged just talking to someone and . . . they're not about to hold that information back. . . . So . . . that **always** affects their social interactions. . . . [but] No [that's not the case for me] . . . not really, no.*

Brooke agreed:

*Oh yeah [there is a difference in attitude on campus toward students with physical disabilities versus students who have learning challenges]. I think most of it's cause you can't see my challenges. . . . Like, with most people you can't see anyone's challenges that aren't on the outside and because people have physical disabilities, I think it's so much harder for them because you can see it and it—there's no way around it and . . . everything's disclosed to everybody. If I wore, 'I have an LD' on my forehead, like, I think I'd be treated a lot differently . . . just in general, buying a coffee, dressed in this with that, right?*

According to Brooke, the visibility of the disability created negative perceptions such as the fact that they are less capable. In Brooke's opinion, this automatic disclosure also changed the way people with physical disabilities were treated. In fact, Brooke herself mentioned feeling bad for people with physical disabilities because they cannot hide their disability, and that others in society feel this way as well. She went on to say:

*I think it's **so** hard for them and there's no way I could live with my disability on my sleeve, right? . . . I know that there's compensations for them and everything*

*too, but I think it's just the hardest thing in the whole wide world just to show that side of you and just like to, you know, whether it's physical in any way it is, it's like, people see it and I know your struggle and they feel bad generally and everything but it's like, they'll never be able to do anything so, I feel so . . . People feel bad . . . **for** people with disabilities—a physical disabilities [sic] because you know, they can see it . . . and it's hard, right?*

In her comments, Brooke is comparing her experiences as a person with a learning challenge to someone who has a physical disability. In Brooke's opinion, while her disability was difficult in many ways, it simply did not compare to the experiences of people living with physical disabilities. The concept of pity is also brought to the forefront here. Brooke and others in society, feel pity for those with physical disabilities perhaps because "they'll never be able to do anything" and they are marked very visibly as something that is deviant from the norm.

Anne on the other hand, felt that people are more likely to be sympathetic to those with physical disabilities like herself, because they actually believe that the visibility of the disability alone illustrates to others that they require additional help. Yet, in Anne's opinion, people do not share the same concern for those with invisible disabilities, making *their* experiences on campus even more difficult than her own. She stated:

*I would say the . . . degree that ableism and gender would . . . like negatively affects someone's development is much like, it's less likely to happen, but it's still issue [sic] kind of. Umm, I feel like if you have a visible disability like me, people will—more likely to help you. . . . Like, they can feel . . . sympathy. But . . . if you have an invisible disability that's one of my friends do [sic] . . . people will like . . . "that's just a excuse of behaving [sic] poorly, it's not like you physically can't do something." People won't really understand.*

In addition, she makes a distinct comparison between femaleness and disability, drawing attention to the fact that they are both viewed as lacking in some way to males and the able-bodied in society. She added:

*I would say unconsciously people will sometimes think . . . if you are a girl you would likely to go less far . . . compared to like, versus you're a boy. . . . Yeah*

*[less far in school and in life] . . . like, in a lot of area[s], not just school, like in life or in your future career, in school, whatever. . . . [There is a difference in attitude towards people on campus who have physical disabilities versus people who have learning challenges] . . . I think for people with physical disabilities, people can—**most** people can understand, like if someone can't walk, someone can't see, they need help. But for people with learning disability . . . people will say things like, they are just stupid, or not deserve to do well . . . it's still happening. Like . . . in my classes I will say that's not likely to happen cause we're like, pursuing helping field in the future and most of my classmates or professors are pretty understanding . . . but overall, I . . . mean, that's still happening. . . . Like . . . what about people with autism? . . . What about people with ADHD?*

This comparison draws attention to societal beliefs that "girls would likely go less far" in life as well as the fact that having a visible disability is often the true definition of someone who is disabled. While girls are lacking in comparison to men in schools, the workplace, and life in general, those with disabilities are lacking in both physical and mental capability. In Anne's opinion, since a person with a physical disability is often easier to believe, people with learning challenges are met with resistance and sometimes even anger.

Interestingly, in addition to the beliefs that visibility and sympathy work differently for those with visible disabilities than invisible disabilities and the shared experiences of being women with disabilities, Jenn, Anne, and Brooke also brought up differences in social relationships between these two groups. Jenn and Brooke for example, felt that social interactions were consistently affected in negative ways for a person with a physical disability, whereas in contrast, Anne believed the opposite: that these same social interactions would negatively impact those with invisible disabilities in significant ways. It seems that at least some of the concerns shared from both of these women toward those with visible and invisible disabilities, respectively, lie in their ability to create positive social relationships.

Lastly, concern for those with invisible disabilities was also noted by Amélie, a woman with a physical disability. Similar to Anne who believed that having an invisible disability was much more difficult on campus and elsewhere, Amélie also felt that she would never want to have a learning challenge because of the *academic* difficulty that comes with the disability. She added:

*Oh, I can say one thing. Personally, I would not want to be person . . . with learning challenge because it's very challenging because university that's place [sic], it's a faculty where you have to always keep up with your GPA, you always have to study, and if for example, if you have learning disability, it's gonna be much more difficult, much more time-consuming and you will be basically—like, I already spend so much time studying, you know? And a person with learning disability like spends more more [sic] time studying and basically, cannot be full time student, has to be part time. So, it will not take a person three, four years to graduate it will take more than that. So I—it is very difficult. . . . Plus, you have to pay for tutors, you have to pay for you know . . . for . . . not professor, just a teacher to teach you different way, yeah . . . it's tough.*

While women with physical disabilities attempt to minimize their status as a person with a disability in various ways including diverting attention away from their disability and exhibiting generosity, joy, and their physical capability (Taub et al., 2004; see also, Barnard-Brak et al., 2010; Olney & Brockelman, 2005), it has been found by Olney and Brockelman (2005), that those with more invisible disabilities "do not identify with others with disabilities or with the disability rights community" (p. 88) perhaps because they are viewed as physically capable, and therefore, should not have a disability. This led to others not understanding them, and a lack of their own identity within the disability community (2005). Amélie's comments about those with invisible disabilities seem to reflect not only her concern for their experiences on campus in comparison to her own, but the societal constructions about them. First, the construction that they are less academically capable, and second, that in order to achieve the same results academically that *normal* students do they will need to put in a lot of extra time, effort, and money.

Interestingly too, her feelings of sympathy and concern also comes back to the concept of being a fully productive citizen (Devlin & Pothier, 2006) which has been applied to both those with visible and invisible disabilities. Because a student with an invisible disability will have to take so much extra time and money to achieve results similar to those of the average, normal student, people believe it would be impossible for them to be full-time students, or in other words, fully productive "citizens" within the postsecondary community.

Clear distinctions were made by the women in this study regarding their experiences and understandings of visible and invisible disabilities. These distinctions particularly included the notion that simply the visibility of the disability itself denoted connotations of physical incapability, sympathy, and perhaps more understanding and compassion. However, while visible disabilities were discussed in context with *physical* incapability, invisible disabilities were often attached to notions of *academic* incapability, and the feelings of disbelief that follow from the simple fact that the disability cannot be seen by others.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

After a detailed analysis of the 16 semi-structured interviews, several conclusions have emerged which will be summarized below. It is clear from the data, however, that power and ableism continue to exist within postsecondary education with respect to disability. Yet, while institutional power and ableist perceptions seemingly impacted the academic and social experiences of many of the women in the study—those with learning challenges as well as those with physical disabilities—the experiences of the women within these two groups also differed from one another in several areas as well.

Prior to this study, the limited research conducted on women with disabilities in university as the sole population were often focused on either invisible disabilities alone (i.e. ADHD) (see for example, Dwyer, 2000; Hinckley & Alden, 2005) or visible disabilities alone (see for example, Taub et al., 2004; Zitzelsberger, 2005). Within Canada particularly, very few studies existed that examined the academic and social experiences of women with visible disabilities and invisible disabilities in the same study. In fact, in all of my extensive research on the subject since beginning my studies, only one other Canadian study was found which did this (see for example, Erten 2011). Even with this being the case, that particular study did not take into consideration the role that visibility may play in these experiences. The research therefore, has been quite limited. This is important to note as it is critical to understand the postsecondary academic and social experiences of *both* of these populations, as they may give us critical insight into their shared commonalities, as well as insight into how their experiences may *differ* based on the factors of the invisibility and visibility of their disability alone.



To my knowledge, this study is the first in this country to not only discuss the academic and social experiences in university of women with learning challenges as well as physical disabilities, but also take a more in-depth look into the role that visibility or invisibility may play in these women's experiences. Therefore, this research can make important contributions to the field in a number of ways. Firstly, educators may be able to improve their practice and delivery when it comes to women with disabilities. Namely, they may be able to improve upon their assessment methods and interactions to suit the individual and unique needs of both women with visible disabilities as well as invisible ones. These include perhaps needing a variety of academic assessments for those with learning challenges, or those with physical disabilities wanting to be seated with their classmates rather than feeling isolated in the front of the room. Truly understanding how to best serve this population through further training or other methods would perhaps allow them to really thrive in a university environment. In fact, it may be a critical component to their overall success in university classrooms. University staff and administrators could use the results of this research to take an in-depth look into the policies and practices that are currently in place within their own institutions. This may help to uncover areas in policy and practice that are currently operating under an ableist framework, in order to make positive and effective change to serve all students on their campuses equitably. Students as well, both with disabilities and without, can use this research to empower them to ask questions of their own institutions regarding their social and academic experiences on campus. This research can be used as a platform to further critical debate and discussion around disability in postsecondary institutions perhaps most importantly, on societal constructions and beliefs around concepts of visibility and invisibility. The following discussion will highlight key findings in each of the three

subsections, followed by the limitations of the current study as well as recommendations for future research.

### **Politics of Women and Disability in Academia**

In the present study, several questions were posed to the women in order to gain a better understanding of their postsecondary academic experiences. In general, women experienced times where they were confronted with institutional power and ableist practices in their academic lives. This was often the case when dealing with their professors and/or teaching advisors. For example, despite stating that their academic experiences with professors were positive, the majority of women in the study noted having an issue with a faculty member or teaching assistant. This was particularly the case for women with learning challenges. In some cases, these issues were severe. Women were told they should drop classes, they would never graduate, one professor even threatened legal action against a woman who needed to record his lectures. It was often the case though, that these issues stemmed from "hidden attitudinal barriers" (Erten, 2011, p. 110) such as not wanting to provide classroom accommodations like making class notes available ahead of time, allowing them to tape-record, or using an FM system for them, to treating them unfairly, and not caring about them. With these kinds of encounters with professors who already *knew* of their disability, it was perhaps no surprise that the disclosure process also created problems for some women in this study.

Issues of power and ableism were also evident in institutional practices such as disclosure policies and a lack of variety in their assessments and evaluations. Feelings about the university disclosure policy for example, where it is the responsibility of the individual with a disability to disclose to each of their professors individually in order to receive their accommodations, was mixed. Just over half of the women felt that this

process gave them control over the information the professor receives about them, it gave them a sense of empowerment, and allowed them to differentiate themselves from others. However, some women in the study seemed to recognize ableist beliefs and practices being played out hidden behind the language of policy. Nearly one third of the women felt awkward, shameful and embarrassed, nervous and anxious, feared judgment by others, and worried about their confidentiality as a student with a disability being exposed to others. Also, women shared that upon disclosure, professor attitudes toward them changed. It seemed though, that the visibility of the disability played a role in the *kind* of change that occurred. While some of the women believed that professors became much nicer to them after they disclosed (one of these being a woman with a physical disability), women with learning challenges felt that they began to receive more attention and help, expectations of them were lowered, and they were now thought of as less intelligent and credible than before they disclosed. Some women felt that overall, the process as a whole would be much better if *they* did not have to disclose their disabilities directly to faculty members. Instead, someone from the disability services office could do this for example, as it would protect them from this kind of judgment.

Whatever their beliefs about the disclosure process. however, it would seem that for many women in this study, awareness training for professors was something that was sorely lacking. The women felt that training professors regarding teaching and accommodating students with disabilities was critical. Students with learning challenges felt that professors and teaching assistants needed more education on learning challenges and disabilities particularly, in order to dispel the assumption that learning challenges equate to a lower intelligence as well as the fact that these types of disabilities are often not acknowledged as real. However, some were unsure about how to implement this

training for faculty members and assistants in a proper, appropriate way. Interestingly, in a few cases when ignorant comments did happen upon disclosure, blame was not placed on the person themselves, but rather on a more general lack of understanding about disabilities. It was mentioned that these beliefs and behaviours may instead be due to certain cultural differences.

Despite the issues with the disclosure process and faculty members, women in this study seemed to rally against societal constructions of disability when it came to their beliefs about school success. For example, it appeared that the majority of women believed they were successful in school. However, while some women discussed their personal definitions of success as having to do with their high expectations of themselves, having good relationships with professors and peers, doing their best, clear expectations of their goals, being involved on campus, and learning as much as possible, the majority of women in this study noted good grades as being the largest measure of this success. In fact, the women that did not believe they were academically successful often felt their grades were not high enough compared to other people in their classes. This may be due to the fact that test scores and grades often reproduce standards of normality (Brueggemann et al., 2001) and therefore, some of the women may feel that achieving high grades may further validate their place in postsecondary education to themselves, as well as other people. Perhaps as further evidence of this point, half of these women who believed they were successful contributed their success to something internal such as hard work, dedication, and an internal drive to succeed. This belief that their worthiness and achievement as students is reflected in high grades may have also impacted their future plans for themselves.

Many of the women in this study discussed their future academic plans. These plans often consisted of getting an advanced degree following their postsecondary education in various areas including medicine, law, nursing, psychology, education, and public health. Not only did these women have a deep desire to achieve their future academic goals, but they also showed a large amount of confidence that they *could* achieve these. This was often because they understood their limits as well as their capabilities for things they were good at doing. Of the women who expressed they lacked the confidence to achieve their future goals, many expressed self-doubt as the reason for it. Also, women noted the lack of role models in the university law school, and that the standardized tests needed upon entry into many of these programs are not helpful for students with disabilities. This may be because the standardized tests that many universities require for acceptance into their programs as a measure of intelligence and worthiness, are often structured to keep those with disabilities out of these areas and continue to reinforce societal standards of ableism and ableistic practices (see Brueggemann et al., 2001). While this is likely not done purposefully, this may also be why establishing strong support systems was viewed as so important.

Having good support was also critical to the women of this study with respect to their success in school. In fact, interactions of caring with someone on campus (the majority of these being student disability advisors and professors), were discussed fondly by many of the women. In their opinion, these interactions showed that people cared about them. Often, these advisors and professors took extra time to get to know them and explain concepts to ensure understanding, and in some cases, these people took action on the women's behalf. Perhaps most interestingly, the vast majority of women who stated that they experienced a positive, caring interaction with an individual on campus (such as

an advisor or professor) also believed they were successful in school. It would seem that this type of support from others on campus may have aided the women when they had to persevere through institutional barriers.

Prior to their postsecondary careers, students with disabilities, not unlike newly minted professional athletes, are governed by a team of individuals to ensure success. According to McCarthy (2007), disability is often "a communal effort among parents, teachers, and caregivers" (p. 11). This is simply not the case in university. Perhaps this is why many of the women in the study felt that having self-determination and self-advocacy skills and the will to persevere was a critical component to their postsecondary experiences. In fact, the majority of women in this study discussed times where they had to *continually* fight for themselves in order to get what they needed. This "survival of the fittest", as one of the women remarked, is unfortunate as women with learning disabilities particularly, already feel challenged by faculty members who feel inaccessible to them and receiving academic information in a timely manner (Field et al., 2003). The desire from these women to achieve though, often helped them to persist.

In light of the action that the women needed to take in their educational careers, perseverance through various obstacles became important. Many women were convinced that not only could they achieve academically, but could overcome any challenge that they may face in the process. For example, some of the women shared that rather than give up when faced with problems, they went back to re-do some of their undergraduate coursework, confront department heads about issues they were facing with professors, and called friends if they needed help somewhere on campus. While family and friends often played a role in these women continuing to push forward, for some women, persistence in the face of these challenges was a show of independence and capability.

What I mean by that is the understanding of preconceived notions and misconceptions about disability may have led the women to want to *prove* that they belong. This is perhaps because in postsecondary education, students with disabilities "must find—and use—his or her own voice" (McCarthy, 2007, p. 11) in order to survive.

One of the ways in which these women's voices could be used effectively is through assessment methods. The variety in assessment methods seemed to be particularly important for the women with learning challenges in this study. Nearly half of the women with learning challenges in this study felt that being able to show their professors what they actually know through presentations, oral exams, or writing tasks would be the most academically beneficial for them. This is because it would allow them to show what they know and thoroughly explain themselves. Multiple choice tests are often the assessment method of choice in university (DiBattista & Kurzawa, 2011) yet, very few women in this study believed that these types of questions were beneficial for their success in the class. In addition, since there are very few evaluations being given throughout the course of the semester (sometimes just one midterm exam and one final exam), the women felt that the stakes were much higher for them to achieve.

Yet, while women recognized the importance of variety in terms of their overall grade in the course, none of the women mentioned discussing this issue with their professors or taking it up with administrators within the university. There may be a few reasons for this, one being that they already felt bogged down by the busy schedule any university student has with the added tasks they also had to do as a student with a disability. However, another reason may be more probable. Disciplinary power, as defined by Foucault, requires participation of not only the dominant group, but also "operates invisibly as a self-regulated activity carried out by disabled students" (Hibbs &

Pothier, 2006, p. 196). In this case, the students themselves must be complicit and accepting of these methods as simply fact, not knowing they are "freely taking on a role that support existing structures of power" (p. 201). Thus, power structures continue to operate within the university system, with the "consent" of all involved (Femia, 1975, p. 31). Thus, it was clear that the academic experiences of the women with disabilities in this study were often shaped by social constructions of disability and the visibility versus invisibility of disability, as well as power and power differentials between themselves, the faculty, and the institution as a whole. It appeared though, that these events were not just isolated within their academic lives, but socially as well, where they continued to face instances of ableism and hegemony in their daily lives on campus.

### **Experience of Women with Disabilities in Postsecondary Social Life**

Previous research has shown that participation in postsecondary social life is often lacking for all students with disabilities for reasons which include being ignored by those in command of such events (Wilson et al., 2000), awkward feelings from other nondisabled students toward them (Nichols & Quaye, 2009), and a lack of inclusion from the institution itself (Bruder & Mogro-Wilson, 2010). However, this was not the case in this particular study. In fact, the vast majority of women were involved in at least one club or group on campus with just over half of the women involved in several activities at the university. In addition, a quarter of those women held leadership positions within their chosen clubs including vice-presidential, presidential, advisory, executive director, and director positions. Perhaps so many women were active in the campus community in order to combat societal and institutional beliefs regarding disability, and prove to others that they belong among the academic elite. Ultimately, it would seem that participation aided them in the formation of their identity, as they may feel they are now a part of



something bigger than themselves. These activities seemed to give many women a sense of purpose and direction as they felt they were active in a cause which helped others and the greater good. In addition, it also gave them an opportunity to create support systems for themselves of their own choosing, which have encouraged them to push through difficult times. Perhaps most importantly, it would seem that the empathy these women shared with others in their chosen clubs and activities gave them a reason to continue.

Overall, participating in clubs and activities which aided underrepresented and marginalized populations and groups was particularly important to the women in this study. This may be because these women had a personal understanding of the barriers these groups faced and may have also recognized the societal definition that true citizenship requires full productivity (Devlin & Pothier, 2006). While some women noted that participating in certain activities was good for networking, meeting new people, and future schooling opportunities, most had intrinsic motivations for wanting to be a part of the groups they were in. They had for example, a personal interest in the organization and the message it stood for, they wanted to empower others and make a difference, and being a part of the group felt right to them. This is similar to other research studying the meaning of participation for people with disabilities. Hammel, Magasi, Heinemann, Whiteneck, Bogner, and Rodriguez (2008) found that the act of participation was viewed by people with disabilities as something which offered a sense of belonging and connection to others, gave them both the "sense of personal power" and freedom to make their own choices, and was defined by what they could offer others rather than what a particular group could give them (p. 1451). While it may be true that these feelings hold for anyone wanting to be in such a group, perhaps those with disabilities feel even stronger about their sense of power and choice as they may have felt powerless in other

aspects of their academic and social lives. Further, these intrinsic motivations for participation may have also influenced their perceptions of their social interactions on campus.

The damage of hegemony, social constructions, and ableist beliefs can perhaps best be seen in the perceptions these women had about their particular social interactions. In sharing their social interactions with others, just over half of the women in this study believed that their interactions with others were positive. Notably, however, visibility played a somewhat significant role in the nature of interactions with others on campus. For example, every woman in the study except for one described at least one negative social interaction where they faced feelings of jealousy (in regards to extra accommodations like extra time on exams), stigma, disbelief, and judgment from other nondisabled people on campus. Perhaps unsurprisingly, encounters with the women in which others expressed doubt, jealousy, and a belief that extra accommodations were unfair were only directed toward those with learning challenges. This is may be due to the fact that the invisibility of the disability itself often plays a role in perceptions of ability (Mullins & Preyde, 2013). Often, others questioned the women about the authenticity of their disability and wondered whether it was simply a lack of effort on their part. Some people even shared with the women that they believed they were entitled to receive advantages that other nondisabled students on campus were not. Interestingly, there were opposing views held by women with visible disabilities and invisible disabilities with respect to their identity as a friend. In addition, while most of the women viewed their social interactions with others on campus as positive, several women did not believe this was true, with a large percentage of these being women with learning challenges. These women believed that their encounters were in fact negative, and that they did not have

many friends for reasons which included feeling misunderstood and excluded by others. This most certainly had an impact on their decision to disclose to their peers.

For most women the process of disclosing was either rarely done, or done over a period of time as they established a friendship. Women very often made the choice to not reveal their disabilities, and usually only did disclose if they were asked directly or with friends whom they considered to share a close relationship with. This was also the case for a few women in the study who had visible disabilities that were less obvious to the general public. Some said they made this decision as a result of the fear that they would lose the positive perceptions people had of them. These fears included the fact that people would no longer look up to them or attribute their success to intelligence or true ability. Further, decisions to disclose were also impacted by the lack of understanding that people have about disabilities. Some women with invisible disabilities felt that this choice helped them to feel more comfortable and allowed them to control the narrative. These fears of a changing perception may have also spurred them to act when encountering perceptions of disability that they felt were wrong.

Despite the negative encounters that the majority of the women in this study described, many of them took a proactive approach when dealing with others on campus. When faced with these kinds of negative stereotypes and beliefs about their disabilities for example, women with learning challenges often confronted social constructions of invisible disabilities. They did this by educating others about what these types of disabilities mean. Often, women met negative, stereotypical, and ignorant comments from others with educational and intelligent responses meant to teach them about misconceptions regarding disability and hopefully change their minds. For some women the impetus for educating was born of out frustration at the complete ignorance shown to

them. In general though, women shared that people may have made these comments because they lack understanding about what invisible disabilities really are.

### **Women and Disability on Campus**

After discussions with these women, it was clear that critical aspects of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as well as Universal Design (UD) were missing from their campus experiences. While campus barriers were noted by many of the women in the study, women with physical disabilities shared major issues when it came to structural barriers such as accessibility on campus as well as other philosophical hurdles, while women with learning challenges shared having other barriers such as greater constraints on their time. These are described in detail below.

With respect to the lack of Universal Design for Learning and barriers on campus, a resistance to change by the normative population on campus was evident. While one woman with an invisible disability noted the numbering system of offices and rooms were sometimes a problem for people with learning challenges, all the women with visible disabilities in this study shared problems with elevators in buildings not functioning properly, no open doors in buildings making it difficult for them to maneuver around, and physical isolation in classrooms by having to sit in the front row. While anyone *can* conceivably sit in the front row, those with physical disabilities cannot sit anywhere they want, barring them from possible social interactions with others in their classes. A solution for this may be ramps instead of stairs in lecture halls or widening rows so that persons with wheelchairs can choose to sit wherever they like during class. Other notable problems that these women shared were the Braille system being absent within campus buildings, stairs on campus not being marked by reflector tape for people with visual impairments, and a lack of snow removal services making it difficult for the women to

navigate campus in the winter season. Perhaps though, one of the best examples shared by the women that illustrated normative processes being played out on campus was that of the basement room.

The basement room, a small room located in the basement of the student library outfitted for students with disabilities on campus, illustrated clearly how hegemony, social norms, and institutional power operated at the university. This room, a small classroom size, was meant to serve the entire university population of students with disabilities. However, it was not only the size and location of the room that was troubling, but access to the room itself.

While this room was operated by the disability services office on campus, and all of the women in this study were registered to receive services (with one in the middle of the registration process at the time of her interview), only a third were told about the room's existence by those in the disability office. Most were either never told at all, or found out about the room by a friend who happened to be using it. This was particularly problematic, as not only were students with disabilities effectively removed from the normal student population, but they were also not informed about services that could have been particularly useful to them. In addition, the women who did know about the room, quickly realized that it was only accessible by keycard which had to be ordered, given time to process, and picked up on the other side of campus. Many women in the study, both with physical disabilities and learning challenges, shared their concern regarding the room's accessibility for those with physical disabilities. The women noted that there are a few flights of stairs to get down to the basement, and elevators which should have provided adequate service were rarely in working order. Some women even likened the room to a dungeon and questioned why it was so secluded from the rest of the university

population, who have study rooms and carrels on the main floor and above. Notably, there was an almost immediate recognition of the inaccessibility of the room by the women with physical disabilities in this study, whereas most of the women with learning challenges did not mention this as a potential problem. They questioned whether this was an attempt by university administration to demonstrate to the rest of the campus community that students with disabilities should be ignored. Further, having to deal with these types of challenges only added more to their already overloaded schedules, which was a particular problem for the women with learning challenges in this study.

Despite equitable policies that are supposed to help those with disabilities on campus, additional barriers were noted by many of the women in the study, the majority of these being women with learning challenges. These were barriers that the nondisabled student population on campus did not encounter. While the women in general felt that they had many more steps to take than the average student on campus, the women with learning challenges were particularly affected by the additional time these tasks took them to complete. For example, in addition to being a student with a disability and all that entails, they were also expected to complete additional paperwork, disclose their disabilities to each and every one of their professors with a letter, contend with possible issues with faculty members or assistants with respect to their disability, and must also remember to register to take their exams with the disability services office.

Since so much was shared regarding barriers within the university, discussions around the inclusivity of the campus were somewhat surprising. It would seem that for these women, barriers either made societal norms more clear to them or allowed them to continue their unknowing consent of power differentials. In general, the women were divided on the issue of whether or not their campus was an inclusive one. Slightly over

half of the women who felt the campus was inclusive shared that they felt welcome and believed that people truly cared about them. For some, this was unlike their previous schooling experiences. One woman with a learning challenge though, suggested that the invisibility of her disability may have impacted her belief that the campus was an inclusive one. In her mind, if she had a visible disability instead of one that was not immediately recognizable to everyone, she may have felt differently.

Notably though, of the women that did not feel the campus was inclusive, many seemed to recognize how power and ableism had impacted their lives. They shared their beliefs that the university is exclusive, lacks community, has misleading marketing, is a place where racism exists, and does not see diversity as an advantage but rather, as something unfavourable. Women shared particular examples which they felt illustrated these beliefs quite clearly, some of which included a low percentage of racial minorities in the law school, inequitable examination policies for students with disabilities, courses based mostly on textbook material, rarely seeing the campus bus for those with visible disabilities, and leadership positions being given to *normal* looking students. These particular understandings of power structures and constructions on campus may have also had even more of an impact on minority women in this study.

Societal constructions of normality versus abnormality certainly played a role for many minority women as they often measured themselves against what society considered normal. In general, the women felt differently and believed that they did not fit in anywhere. They also felt inferior and isolated in some cases, sometimes putting limits on how successful they believed they could be. Differences between these women and others were made clear to the women in several ways. For example, they noticed changes in how they were treated by professors in comparison to others which left them

feeling overlooked and intimidated. Unfortunately, while some women clearly recognized and understood that this treatment was unprofessional and wrong, others internalized these messages of difference and attributed them to the number of marginalized groups they identified with (being a racial minority and having a disability, for example). Perhaps though, a large part of this problem is due to a lack of academic and social support on campus.

The power of the institution as a promoter of the norm could be seen in the lack of tutors, mentors, resources, and a sense of community on campus for the women with disabilities in this study. As noted earlier, having good support systems in place while on campus is an especially critical component to the success of students with disabilities in university, both academic (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Goode, 2007; Gregg, 2007; Troiano et al., 2010; Hinckley & Alden, 2005; Hogansen et al., 2008; Skinner, 2007; Wilson et al., 2000) and otherwise (Field et al., 2008). Yet, the women in the current study felt that these resources (and others) on campus were sorely lacking. Disability for some, was often a lonely experience. Being able to share their frustrations, thoughts, and experiences with other students who also have disabilities was seen as something very important—and currently lacking—for many women in this study. In addition, while many noted the benefit of having a mentor while on campus, a very small percentage actually had one. This was mainly due to the fact that people on campus were unwilling to do things outside of the norm (Devlin & Pothier, 2006), which sent a clear message to the women about their positions on the university hierarchy.

There were several factors mentioned as potential reasons for the lack of resources (tutoring, mentoring and otherwise) on campus. Sometimes, people in positions to provide these opportunities (faculty members, others in advisory roles) stated that they



were too busy. In other cases, financial reasons were noted as a potential cause behind this lack. For example, the removal of the writing centre was mentioned, which offered a variety of services to students, as perhaps being done as a cost-cutting measure. Further, the lack of ADD coach and ADHD resources was a source of frustration for some. One woman in particular felt that the lack of ADHD resources left her feeling neglected, especially because this type of disability is often viewed as only happening to men and boys. In some cases, when women confronted the disability services office about these issues, they were told not enough people wanted to use them and if they really wanted the services they could do it themselves. Interestingly, these services and resources were often viewed as being a great benefit, and their removal once again illustrated to others as well as the women themselves that they are unimportant and should be ignored. This was perhaps why so many of them yearned to fit in with other, nondisabled students.

One of the major findings of the current study had to do with the desire for normality. The vast majority of women indicated an eagerness to fit in with the *normal* population, almost all of these being women with learning challenges. They recognized that they were not the same as their nondisabled peers, either in their own perception or in how others saw them. In order to combat this difference and be the same as everyone else they often tried to portray themselves as nondisabled, internalized their disability, did not want to be seen as "special" and did not want people to think they were less intelligent. Further, proving their intelligence was viewed as very important in order to help fight harmful constructions that having a learning challenge also meant being less intelligent. In short, they wanted to prove that they belonged in university and could be successful there. In fact, one of the ways in which achieving this "level-playing field" (Hibbs & Pothier, 2006, p. 195) was sought, was through disability services on campus.

The first step in receiving appropriate services and accommodations for students with disabilities on campus is registration with the disability services office. Every woman in this study was registered to receive these services, with one woman in the middle of her registration process at the time of her interview. They recognized that they needed to be registered while students on campus because it provided additional help and accommodations that they would not get otherwise. They wanted to be successful academically, and they realized their need for proper support. For some of the women who were identified as having a disability earlier in their schooling experiences, registering for services in university seemed an obvious and sensible step. The impetus for registration for some was a recommendation by other people, as well as wanting to know what options could be available for them if they did so.

Interestingly, the reasons for registration clearly differed between women with learning challenges and women with physical disabilities. For the majority of those with visible disabilities, choosing to register was the result of wanting to be physically comfortable in a classroom setting. On the other hand, those with invisible disabilities expressed more of a desire for the continuation of support systems, which may have been a result of the recurring stigma that learning challenges can simply be cured with hard work and effort. Registering for the purposes of support may have helped the women in their effort to change public perceptions of invisible disability as they now had people around them to help legitimize their disabilities. On the other hand, visible disabilities are often understood, accepted, and already legitimized by others because it is something they can *see*, they may not have felt as strongly about registering for the purposes of support.

The ease of the registration process itself though, seemed to depend on the amount of time spent. Of the many women who felt this process was an easy one, the women who

spent less time making appointments or going to meetings were more likely to describe the process as easy overall. Another factor was the recognition that their disability was simply a part of who they were, which contributed positively to the process itself. It also seemed that women who attended transition events put on by the university prior to beginning their schooling felt more prepared overall, and perhaps unsurprisingly, were better informed than those who did not. Unfortunately though, this was not the case for everyone.

Despite the ease mentioned by some of the women, the registration process as a whole was often another way that the university maintained and reinforced ableist practices. This was particularly the case for women with invisible disabilities. In order to be fully registered with disability services, women had to go through a registration process which could be lengthy and difficult. In fact, all of the women who believed this to be the case were also women with learning challenges. These women not only encountered issues in relation to time, but also in the expense involved in getting testing and documentation in order to legitimize their disabilities to others. Further, access to technology and devices that would have almost certainly made their time on campus easier and perhaps more successful was incredibly difficult, leaving the women frustrated and angry. In some cases, they had to wait a very long time to get the testing and accommodations that they needed to be registered for disabilities that they were already diagnosed with previously. In fact, one woman waited a full academic year and another one semester to finally receive what they needed. This forced the women to find alternate ways of being successful in their classes and get their work done appropriately. However, once accommodations were finally given, sometimes they were not successful. Note-taking services especially were mentioned as a source of frustration for some women.

They recognized that using these services opened them up to breaches of their confidentiality, and in some cases, was described as an unfair practice. Women encountered issues getting notes in a reasonable amount of time (and sometimes, not at all), which may have ultimately affected their success in the course. These registration issues may have been a direct result of the fact that their disability is an invisible one, requiring more proof and documentation than those easily seen by others.

Knowing *how* to register as a student with a disability and get information from disability services was also problematic. As far as how to begin the process, women shared that there was little communication from the university for how to do this, and the thousands of dollars that needed to be paid for disability testing would not be refunded if they were not found to have a disability. This may be a problem for other women with disabilities on campus who had not been previously diagnosed, which was a concern shared by some of the women. They worried that perhaps other students would be missing out on a valuable resource that could help their university experiences overall. In fact, women had little to no information on the services that were available on campus for those who had disabilities prior to the start of school. When still in secondary school, a very small number of the women were told about the disability services offered in postsecondary schools by their learning support teachers. Therefore, they are somewhat at the mercy of those around them to be informed and pass along the right information to them. If they were ill informed prior to starting school, the responsibility was placed on the individual to find the information, find the office, and create a plan of action for how they can get services. This was often the case for things like scholarships and bursaries. Women felt that this information was not shared openly, even though many opportunities existed for students with disabilities to apply for these types of awards. This hiding away

of services for the disability community may be a direct result of ableism and power on campus in order to continue keeping up appearances of the university being only for the elite and able-bodied.

Once they were registered and began receiving services, they were assigned a disability services advisor. This was viewed as very positive for the majority of women. In some cases they felt they were treated as unique individuals with a unique experience and felt they had an advocate in their corner who acted as a supportive safety net. A few, however, felt mixed about their experiences or negatively overall. One woman shared that it came down to the power of the individual. In her view, students with disabilities can and do fall through the cracks if they did not have the power or connections to change their situations. She felt that the number of staff to support students with disabilities was lacking and more needed to be hired, more compassion from those in the office was needed, and in contrast to the opinions shared from others, was not a unique experience. Perhaps reinforcing this opinion, in some cases the women wished their advisors had more time to spend with them. This could also be a result of too few individuals providing services to many students who need them, leaving them with very little time to give to each and every one.

Experiences with the disability services office on campus were often characterized by feelings of blame, and a lack of consistency, equity, and information. While some of the women felt that the office lived up to expectations, it often depended on whether or not these women asked the right questions at the right times. Women were often fighting to get the right information, encountered different information coming from different individuals at any given time, and feeling like the blame and responsibility was put on them. In a few cases, students who made mistakes scheduling exams were blamed and

threatened with the action of now not being allowed to write the exam in the disability office. For some women, the exam process itself was done with a complete lack of equity. While they did get extra time to complete their exams as per disability accommodations, they sometimes spent this extra time waiting for a professor to come and clarify questions. Despite their nondisabled classmates having access to their professor at any given time during an exam, writing in a different area on campus left students with disabilities vulnerable. This often meant that if their professors did not come in time to answer their questions, they needed to figure it out on their own or risk a lower grade.

Finally, a major finding in this study was the perceived difference between those with visible and invisible disabilities by the women themselves. Every woman except one shared their beliefs that differences existed when it came to societal attitudes and reactions toward them, as well as in how they are treated by other people. Interestingly, the visible nature of the disability was often discussed by the women with learning challenges as the catalyst for the amount of judgment received. In general, the women believed that people with physical disabilities were perceived by others as either *more* susceptible to judgment and stigma than those with learning challenges, or that people are more sympathetic to their disabilities because it is clearly visible.

The women crafted societal views of both women with visible disabilities and invisible disabilities along normative lines. In their view, the perception of difference between disabilities hinged on one major factor: visibility. For example, women shared that those with learning challenges were often perceived as being less intelligent, that their disability was fictional and could be controlled and easily cured with hard work, and caused greater intolerance and less understanding. On the other hand, perceptions of visible disabilities were often characterized by receiving greater sympathy,

understanding, and respect from others, something rarely doubted by those around them, as well as something readily accepted because it could not be controlled. However, these perceptions also included the fact that they were seen as less capable, requiring more help, and that they were not fully productive. In their estimation, the visibility of the disability impacted the amount of help given. Since physical disabilities can be easily seen by those around them, they are more likely to get help and support when needed whereas those with learning challenges constantly need to prove that this is the case. Unfortunately, these negative social stereotypes and constructions of disabilities have seemingly impacted the internal beliefs of many women in this study.

Social constructions continued to have an impact on the perceptions of invisible and visible disabilities for the women in this study. These constructions perhaps also impacted their feelings about these types of disabilities. Many women for example, expressed concern and sympathy for others who did not share their particular disability. Those with visible disabilities believed that having an invisible disability would be much more difficult than what they were going through, whereas those with invisible disabilities believed the opposite was true. For women with learning challenges this came down to a lack of choice. The women with learning challenges felt that they had a choice to share their disability with people, and those with physical disabilities lacked having the same choice. On the other hand, for the women with physical disabilities, belief and sympathy was others was shared as something other disabilities did not have. They believed for example, that nondisabled people were more sympathetic toward them, and were not met with the same doubt about their disability that those with learning challenges were. If they needed help for example, people believed they truly needed it,

whereas these women were not sure that those with invisible disabilities would receive that same treatment.

Perhaps in a nod to their own constructions being created by the norms and standards of society, the women with physical disabilities shared that they would not want the academic difficulty that came with this type of disability. Further, the women with learning challenges perceived that social interactions for those with physical disabilities would be constantly affected negatively because of their disability. Notably, however, women with physical disabilities believed the opposite was true.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The findings uncovered from the individual interviews with these women are not meant to be read as sweeping assumptions of the population as a whole. As with any research though, there are some limitations to the study. First, the sample size of women with physical disabilities was relatively small in comparison to the women with learning challenges in this study. Out of sixteen total participants, only three of them were women with physical disabilities. Having a larger population of women with physical disabilities would have potentially introduced more information and experiences in terms of their academic and social lives and/or made the already existing themes for this population even stronger as they could have been corroborated by more women feeling and experiencing similar things.

Another limitation to this study was the fact that the data was only collected at one university, rather than across several postsecondary institutions. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be generalized outside of this particular population of students as it has not been determined whether women attending other universities across Canada are



having similar academic and social experiences that the women in this study are currently encountering.

In addition, a third limitation has to do with the recruitment posters. While the recruitment posters were placed in high traffic areas around campus in order to attract women with disabilities that were perhaps not registered with Student Disability Services, it is entirely possible that many women who would have wanted to participate in a study like this did not see any of them. At any point in time, they could have been removed by other students, or covered by other posters and flyers for various student organizations. This is unfortunate, as some women in the study noted that some of their friends or women that they know who also have a disability chose not to register with Student Disability Services and therefore, would never have known about this study had they not come across one of the posters.

Finally, the last limitation to this study is the fact that the individual interviews were conducted the very first time myself and the participant met. This could have been a drawback because the sharing of potentially sensitive and personal information from the women themselves may have been a very uncomfortable feeling for them to do with a person that they had just met. Of course, this may have stopped some of the women from sharing more information with me that perhaps they would have done had they gotten to know me better over a period of time.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future studies should seek to examine these experiences using a greater number of postsecondary schools throughout Canada. More specifically, future studies should seek to examine these experiences using a greater number of postsecondary schools throughout Canada. In addition, larger numbers of participants in these studies, especially those with

physical disabilities, would be helpful to glean a deeper understanding and more well-rounded picture of the experiences of these women. Perhaps also, future studies utilizing focus groups could be conducted with various personnel within student disability offices in universities across the country to understand their experiences and possibly also validate issues that were discussed in this study with regard to things like a lack of resources, offices that are short-staffed, and their experiences in general. Further, research with the inclusion of men with disabilities would be helpful to compare and contrast from the women's experiences and thoughts uncovered in this current study. Lastly, the understanding and awareness of disabilities from professors has been examined in several previous studies. Yet, to my knowledge, none of these studies have looked at how the awareness and current practices of not only professors but the university staff as a whole (such as those in the student disability office) can be improved through the use of journey mapping, or sometimes called process mapping.

Studies that have been conducted within the healthcare field have used journey mapping to map out the patient experience by first starting with a small team of staff who ultimately decide on a course of action for the patient that suits their individual requirements and also include other possible pathways that could be used for the best care possible for that patient. According to Trebble, Hansi, Hydes, Smith, & Baker (2010), this small team uses a flow diagram to map out this experience on a "single long section of paper with coloured temporary markers" (2010, p. 396) and ultimately recreates the journey "to increase time spent on value adding aspects but reduce waiting times, bottlenecks, and travelling distances" (p.397) and at the end of the process patients also give feedback on the process as a whole. It would be extremely interesting to see how

mapping out the student disability experience in this way would help to improve their experiences on campus and make them more unique and individual.

In this study alone, many participants were frustrated with at least some aspect of their disability service experience and their experiences with their professors and how this ultimately translated negatively into their experiences on campus. Perhaps using new research to determine whether journey mapping would be beneficial to enhance the experience for students with disabilities would be something new and interesting that has not been done within this field before.

### **Conclusions**

In Canada, participation in postsecondary education "will now require making substantial advances with respect to groups that historically have been underrepresented in higher education" (Clark, Moran, Skolnik, & Trick, 2009, p. 2-3). However, women with learning challenges and physical disabilities face additional pressures with respect to obtaining their postsecondary degree. While there has been some research regarding students with disabilities in postsecondary education, very little of it is focused solely on women. Further research is needed in order to gain deeper insight into their experiences, as postsecondary institutions have a responsibility to ensure the success of everyone in their diverse student body.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Consent to Participate in Research form

#### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Study: "Gender, Ableism and Schooling: Exploring the Experiences of Women with Physical Disabilities and Women with Learning Challenges in a Postsecondary School Context"

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Kara Delicata (Principal Investigator) and [REDACTED] (Faculty Advisor) from the Department of Education at [REDACTED]. The results of this study will be contributed to a doctoral dissertation in Educational Leadership and Policy for [REDACTED]

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel to contact either Kara Delicata (Principal Investigator) at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] (Faculty Advisor) at [REDACTED]

#### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the proposed study is to explore the educational and social experiences of current undergraduate females with physical disabilities and learning challenges who have at least one year of undergraduate education at [REDACTED]. Students with disabilities and other marginalized groups have typically been underrepresented in educational research (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2010), and on university campuses across Ontario (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2008).

#### PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

1) Participate in a Semi-Structured Interview. This will be an individual interview lasting approximately 45 minutes to an hour in length. This will be an opportunity for you to share and respond to several open-ended questions by the researcher regarding your academic and social experiences at [REDACTED] as a student with either a physical disability or learning challenge.

#### POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

Everyone enrolled in this study are consenting adults. Given the nature of this study (exploring the experiences of women with physical disabilities and women

with learning challenges in a postsecondary school context), physical, psychological and/or social harm is not likely. To further clarify, minimal risk is anticipated as you can be expected to view the possible harms you may encounter in this study as no greater than those you may experience in your everyday life.

#### POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

By participating in this study, you will also be able to share your experiences and stories in postsecondary education, both academically and socially, which may help you navigate your own personal university experiences in more positive ways.

In addition, while there has been some research regarding students with disabilities in postsecondary education, very little of it is focused solely on women. Further research is needed in order to gain deeper insight into these experiences, as postsecondary institutions have a responsibility to ensure the success of everyone in their diverse student body.

#### COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

As a participant in this study, you be given a \$10 Tim Hortons Gift Card as your compensation for participation.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

In order to protect your anonymity as participants, each participant will be informed that they may choose their own pseudonym which will be used on all documents related to this study including audio transcriptions, the dissertation itself, and any subsequent publications of the data. In addition, you will be asked not to discuss the content of the interview with others once it has finished. The researcher will be the only one to listen to the audio tapes and these audio recordings will be erased following the transcription, after they have been checked again for accuracy. All documents related to this study will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and seen only by myself and my research advisor for a period of 5 years, and then subsequently destroyed.

#### PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

All participants may choose whether to participate in this study or not. If you have chosen to volunteer to participate in this study, you have the choice to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequences of any kind. In addition, you may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer on the semi-structured interview and still remain in the study. In addition, contact information for the researcher is provided on the Letter of Consent if you wish to withdraw from the study.

If you choose to withdraw from the study, you will have the option to remove any and all data that you previously contributed to the study, which will then be destroyed. However, you also have the option to leave previously contributed data as part of the study prior to your withdrawal. There will be no consequences to you for a withdrawal, and you will still receive the compensation for the study. In addition, the investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

#### FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE PARTICIPANTS

A summary of the initial findings of this study will be made available on [REDACTED] website after the completion of the study. The website address to obtain these results is: [REDACTED]. If requested, the researcher will send a brief summary of the results to the participants via email also after the completion of the study.

#### SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

All documents related to this study will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and seen only by myself and my research advisor. The transcriptions of the semi-structured interview will be kept up to five years after the last use of the data for any subsequent publications or presentations that may result from this study. After this period of time the transcriptions will be shredded. The recordings will be erased and destroyed following the transcription and after they have been checked again for accuracy.

#### RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact:

[REDACTED]

#### SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

I understand the information provided for the "Gender, Ableism and Schooling: Exploring the Experiences of Women with Physical Disabilities and Women with Learning Challenges in a Postsecondary School Context" as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.

---

Signature of Investigator

---

Date

**Appendix B: Letter of Information for Consent to Participate in Research form****LETTER OF INFORMATION FOR CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

Title of Study: "Gender, Ableism and Schooling: Exploring the Experiences of Women with Physical Disabilities and Women with Learning Challenges in a Postsecondary School Context"

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Kara Delicata (Principal Investigator) and [REDACTED] (Faculty Advisor) from the Department of Education at [REDACTED]. The results of this study will be contributed to a doctoral dissertation in Educational Leadership and Policy for [REDACTED]

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel to contact either Kara Delicata (Principal Investigator) at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] (Faculty Advisor) at [REDACTED]

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the proposed study is to explore the educational and social experiences of current undergraduate females with physical disabilities and learning challenges who have at least one year of undergraduate education at [REDACTED]. Students with disabilities and other marginalized groups have typically been underrepresented in educational research (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2010), and on university campuses across Ontario (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2008).

**PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

1) Participate in a Semi-Structured Interview. This will be an individual interview lasting approximately 45 minutes to an hour in length. This will be an opportunity for you to share and respond to several open-ended questions by the researcher regarding your academic and social experiences at [REDACTED] as a student with either a physical disability or learning challenge.

**POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

Everyone enrolled in this study are consenting adults. Given the nature of this study (exploring the experiences of women with physical disabilities and women with learning challenges in a postsecondary school context), physical,

psychological and/or social harm is not likely. To further clarify, minimal risk is anticipated as you can be expected to view the possible harms you may encounter in this study as no greater than those you may experience in your everyday life.

#### POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

By participating in this study, you will also be able to share your experiences and stories in postsecondary education, both academically and socially, which may help you navigate your own personal university experiences in more positive ways.

In addition, while there has been some research regarding students with disabilities in postsecondary education, very little of it is focused solely on women. Further research is needed in order to gain deeper insight into these experiences, as postsecondary institutions have a responsibility to ensure the success of everyone in their diverse student body.

#### COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

As a participant in this study, you be given a \$10 Tim Hortons Gift Card as your compensation for participation.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

In order to protect your anonymity as participants, each participant will be informed that they may choose their own which will be used on all documents related to this study including audio transcriptions, the dissertation itself, and any subsequent publications of the data. In addition, you will be asked not to discuss the content of the interview with others once it has finished. The researcher will be the only one to listen to the audio tapes and these audio recordings will be erased following the transcription, after they have been checked again for accuracy. All documents related to this study will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and seen only by myself and my research advisor for a period of 5 years, and then subsequently destroyed.

#### PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

All participants may choose whether to participate in this study or not. If you have chosen to volunteer to participate in this study, you have the choice to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequences of any kind. In addition, you may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer on the semi-structured interview and still remain in the study. In addition, contact information for the researcher is provided on the Letter of Consent if you wish to withdraw from the study.

If you choose to withdraw from the study, you will have the option to remove any and all data that you previously contributed to the study, which will then be



destroyed. However, you also have the option to leave previously contributed data as part of the study prior to your withdrawal. There will be no consequences to you for a withdrawal, and you will still receive the compensation for the study. In addition, the investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

#### FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE PARTICIPANTS

A summary of the initial findings of this study will be made available [REDACTED] website after the completion of the study. If requested, the researcher will send a brief summary of the results to the participants via email also after the completion of the study.

Web address: [REDACTED]

Date when results are available: After August, 2015

#### SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

All documents related to this study will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and seen only by myself and my research advisor. The transcriptions of the semi-structured interview will be kept up to five years after the last use of the data for any subsequent publications or presentations that may result from this study. After this period of time the transcriptions will be shredded. The recordings will be erased and destroyed following the transcription and after they have been checked again for accuracy.

#### RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact:

[REDACTED]

#### SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Appendix C: Sample Questions for the Semi-Structured Interviews**

1. Could you please tell me your story about your experiences thus far as an undergraduate student with a (physical disability or learning challenge) at [name of university] (Mian, 2007).
2. What do you see as your most positive experience since beginning your studies at [name of university]? Why do you consider this experience positive?
3. What do you see as your most challenging experience since beginning your studies at [name of university]? Why do you consider this experience negative?
4. Do you believe that you have been successful academically as a student at [name of university]? If yes, what are some things that you contribute to that success? If no, why do you feel this is not the case?
5. What are some things that could help your academic experience at [name of university] be more successful?
6. Have you accessed offices like Disability Services on campus? What were your reasons for choosing to do this or not?
7. Have you been active in any campus clubs or social events? If you have, what were your reasons for choosing to participate in these activities? If you have not, what were your reasons for choosing not to participate in any campus activities?
8. Describe your participation in social life and activities on campus.
9. Describe your thoughts about [name of university] as an inclusive and welcoming campus for all people.
10. Before we end the interview, is there anything else you wish to add?

## **Appendix D: List of Disabilities Disclosed by Participants**

**Nonverbal Learning Disability-** According to McMaster Children’s Hospital (2004), this type of disability “describe[s] a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in children. . . related to how they learn” (p. 1). These students have trouble understanding non-verbal type communication, such as facial expressions, which can make showing their emotions very challenging, as well as issues with their co-ordination, adapting to changes in their lives, reasoning, organizing, and thinking abstractly (2004). In terms of learning, difficulties understanding non-verbal communication can hinder a student’s ability to “grasp the overall meaning of what they have read. . . [and] get lost in the details” (2004, p. 3)

**Fibromyalgia-** According to Ablin, Buskila, Van Houdenhove, Luyten, Atzeni, and Sarzi-Puttini (2011), “Fibromyalgia is defined as chronic widespread pain. . . and is classified as one of the largest group of soft issue pain syndromes” (p. 585). In addition, it has to do with significant pain in the bones, muscles, and joints and “is characterized by considerably abnormal and reduced pain threshold, and a series of clinical distress variables that include pain, fatigue, sleep disturbance, anxiety and depression” (p. 585).

**Lupus-** According to Wallace (2013) this is an autoimmune disease where, “the body becomes allergic to itself. . . [and] overreacts to an unknown stimulus and makes too many antibodies, or proteins directed against body tissue” (p. 5). In order to be diagnosed as a person with lupus, there are eleven criteria which doctors use, four of which must be met for an official diagnosis (Phillips, 2012). These symptoms include skin abnormalities like rashes and lesions, sensitivity to the sun, sores in the nose, mouth, or throat, and inflammation in the joints and/or the lining around the heart (2012).

**Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder-** Women in this study disclosed as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder combined type, and Natalie’s self-identification as having ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) is a dated term and should instead be Attention- Deficit primarily inattentive type. Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is characterized by trouble focusing and paying attention as well as impulsive and hyperactive behaviours such as fidgeting, talking a lot, and losing things easily (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). Ultimately, these behaviours “can make it hard for a child to do well in school or behave at home or in the community” (National Institute of Mental Health, 2013, para. 3). According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013a), primarily inattentive ADHD is when six symptoms including trouble with organization of school materials, incompleteness of school materials, forgetting things regularly, and lacking in attention to detail are present “for at least six months” (2013a, p. 59). ADHD combined type however, is when both criteria of inattention and hyperactivity “are met for the past 6 months” (2013a, p. 60). Therefore, this includes symptoms such as leaving their seat

when they are not supposed to, talking a lot and shouting out answers (hyperactivity) as well as those noted above for inattention (2013a).

**Generalized Anxiety Disorder-** According to the Fricchione (2004), most anxiety disorders are found in women under the age of 25. It often manifests itself in physical ways, but “is defined as worry that is present most of the time for at least six months” (p. 676). This worry is often hard to control, are associated with other symptoms such as irritability, and can be about anything going on in their lives, which can have a serious negative impact on their schooling experiences (American Psychiatric Association, 2013a; Fricchione, 2004)

**Panic Disorder-** According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013a), a person with this disorder experiences “recurrent unexpected panic attacks” which include symptoms such as sweating, chest pain, or a fear of dying (among others) (p. 208).

**Agoraphobia-** According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013a), a person with agoraphobia is specifically afraid of being in situations where “escape might be difficult or help might not be available in the event of developing panic-like symptoms or other incapacitating or embarrassing symptoms” (p. 217). These include having at least two specific fears which include any of these: crowded, open, and enclosed spaces, cars, buses, or any other kind of public transportation, or being by themselves outside of their own homes (2013a).

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder-** According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013a), this can occur with any person who has seen a traumatic event in first person, experienced it themselves, has heard about a traumatic event has occurred to someone close to them, or when they have repeatedly experienced “details of the traumatic event(s)” (p. 271). This often takes the form of persistent memories, dreams, or flashbacks (among others) (2013).

**Depression-** Unlike simply having a bad day, “depression is a mental illness in which a person has feelings of sadness, instability, loneliness, hopelessness, worthlessness, and guilt” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2001, p.9). Students with depression may feel either extremely sad, guilty, angry, or irritable at any given time (2001). They may also avoid people, not want to participate in school activities, have trouble with their concentration and decision-making, low energy, suicidal thoughts, abuse substances, be lacking in sleep, and let seemingly insignificant things overwhelm them (2001).

**Specific Learning Disorder-** In 2013, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders categorized **dyslexia, disorder of written expression, learning disorder not otherwise specified, and disorder of math** under the term “Specific Learning Disorder” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013b). Therefore, since participants in this study self-identified as having dyslexia, disorder of math, learning disability not otherwise

specified and disorder of written expression, this is important to note. According to the handbook, in order for a Specific Learning disorder to be present, symptoms such as significant difficulties in reading, spelling, understanding meaning in terms of words read, as well as “severe difficulty applying mathematical concepts, facts, or procedures to solve quantitative problems” (among others) must be constant for a minimum period of 6 months (2013a, p. 66). If these criteria are met, they could be specified into the following: “*Dyslexia* is an alternative term used to refer to a pattern of learning difficulties characterized by problems with accurate or fluent word recognition, poor decoding, and poor spelling abilities” (p. 67). If there is impairment to a student’s ability to spell or use grammar and punctuation correctly, as well as the inability to use clear and organized writing, it is considered an “impairment in written expression” (p. 67). Similarly, if there is an impairment to a student’s ability to understand, memorize, calculate, or reason with numbers, it is considered an “impairment in mathematics” (p. 67). According to Rapoport & Ismond (1996), Learning Disorders Not Otherwise Specified “do not meet criteria for any specific Learning Disorder.” (p. 130). For example, the student will have problems in reading, writing, and math that can negatively impact their academic achievement “even though performance on tests that measure individual skills are not significantly below that expected given the individual’s age, intelligence, and education” (p. 130). However, this was before the change to the DSM-5 placing this disability under the “Specific Learning Disorder” category (American Psychiatric Association, 2013b).

**Global Learning Disability** in reading, writing, and math- these types of disabilities “affect all domains of thinking or intellectual functioning” (Liang & Simonoff, 2009, p. 251).

**Bipolar II Disorder-** According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013a), this disorder is when a person experiences both of the following either currently or in the past: a hypomanic episode and a major depressive episode. A hypomanic episode is when a person experiences an irregularly high level of energy and “a distinct period or abnormally and persistently elevated, expansive, or irritable mood” for four days or more where they may have racing thoughts, feel rested after little to no sleep, or an overblown sense of pride/confidence in themselves (among others) (2013a, p. 132). A major depressive episode occurs when a number of symptoms such as marked weight loss, depressed mood, or insomnia have been present during the same time period as the hypomanic episode.

**Multiple Personality Disorder (called Dissociative Identity Disorder in the DSM-5)-** According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013a), this disorder is a “disruption of identity characterized by two or more distinct personality states” (p. 292). Distinct changes to the person (such as a change in their voice) can be noted either by someone around them or the person themselves. Persons with this disorder also face “recurrent

gaps in the recall of everyday events, important personal information, and/or traumatic events that are not inconsistent with ordinary forgetting” (p. 292).

**Partially Sighted Visual Impairment-** According to Nielsen (2009), this means an individual who:

has lost most of his or her sight, cannot see much more than light or some large shapes, and has central visual acuity of 20/70 to 20/200 in the better eye with correction. A partially sighted person with correction sees at 20 feet what the normal eye sees at 70 to 200 feet (p. 181).

**Memory-based Learning Disability-** One participant did in fact, self-identify as having a memory-based learning disability. As there is no distinct category or specific disability entitled, “Memory-based Learning Disability” no definition can be provided accurately here.

**Absence of working memory-** working memory is an important function to our learning in that it’s “the ability we have to hold in mind and mentally manipulate information over short periods of time” (Gathercole & Alloway, 2007). This can include for example, doing mental calculations quickly if you do not have something concrete on hand (2007, p. 4). Therefore, a person without this type of memory then, “would not be able to carry out this kind of complex mental activity in which we have to both keep in mind some information while processing other material” (2007, p. 4).

**VITA AUCTORIS**

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