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## **Institutionalized Ableism and the Misguided "Disability Awareness Day": Transformative Pedagogies for Teacher Education**

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# Institutionalized Ableism and the Misguided “Disability Awareness Day”: Transformative Pedagogies for Teacher Education

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Despite acknowledgement among social justice educators about the need to infuse anti-bias lessons in K-12 curricula, discussions of disability oppression are silent in schools. Token efforts at addressing the topic of disability generally manifest as “disability awareness day(s)” and often include “disability simulations,” which have been long condemned by disability rights activists as promoting cultural attitudes that are ableist in nature. In this article, we discuss a qualitative inquiry that examines shifts in the perceptions of graduate students, with regard to the pedagogical use of disability simulations for teaching children about disability. The context of this study is a teacher education course informed by critical disability studies perspectives. The findings indicate transformations in students’ thinking about the ableism implicit in disability simulations. We discuss the implications of this inquiry for social justice education, and suggest ways to prepare educators to disrupt the socio-political dimensions of disability oppression.

Hey, Hey, Hey, it’s Disability Awareness Day! Everyone gets a chance to see what it’s really like to have a disability! Yank out those blindfolds, grab cotton to stuff in your ears, and plop yourself in a wheelchair to navigate around an obstacle course! . . . Now it is time to tie one of your arms behind you so you can fully appreciate a paralyzed limb. To get the most out of Disability Awareness Day, it is important to try almost all the disabilities on for size. No doubt about it, life with a disability is a tragedy! Why, these poor gimps, blinks, and others would be better off dead! They are so courageous and yet so pitiful as they go about their daily routines. Yep, I’m so glad it’s their fate and not mine. (Brew-Parrish, 1997, para. 1)

There is an increasing acknowledgment among educators today about the need not only to instill in children an appreciation of the full range of diversity that exists in society, but also to address group prejudice. Hackman (2006) argues that social justice education “does not merely examine difference or diversity but pays careful attention to the systems of power and privilege that give rise to social inequality” (p. 104), additionally arguing that, to be most effective, social justice education “requires an examination of systems of power and oppression” (p. 104). Although social justice educators have responded to this need by infusing anti-bias (e.g., anti-racist

and anti-sexist) curricula in K-12 schools, in our experience, anti-ableist curricula are not typically included; indeed the topic of disability is often missing in discourses of diversity in schools and in multicultural education. We concur with Connor and Gabel (2013) in asserting the “relevance of social justice to reframing disability” (p. 101) and, we argue, the relevance of disability to social justice education.

If the topic of disability is addressed in schools at all, it is likely to be in the form of isolated Disability Awareness days, which usually involve a variety of activities aimed, presumably, at increasing acceptance of individuals with disabilities. To this end, the all too familiar simulation exercises are ubiquitous; indeed, few disability awareness events are considered complete without the obligatory simulations of particular disabilities, such as wearing blindfolds while attempting to navigate one’s environment, wearing socks on one’s hands while completing a task, or cruising around on a wheelchair. These activities that purport to simulate the experience of being disabled have widespread popular appeal; the vast majority of our students, who are usually either pre-service or in-service teachers, tell us that that they have either participated in these, developed these activities for their own classrooms, or would like to do so, suggesting that disability simulation exercises are an established fixture in institutional efforts at educating student populations about the topic of disability.

### The Problematic Nature of Disability Simulation

Disability simulations, though surely well-intentioned, have been long condemned by disability rights activists and scholars (e.g., Connor & Bejoian, 2007) who assert that the implications of these are problematic and that the outcomes are misleading at best. According to Brew-Parrish (1997), disability simulations are outrageous and objectionable to the disability community and do nothing but reinforce negative stereotypes. Similarly, Valle and Connor (2011) assert that Awareness Days are a clear example of not understanding the perspectives of people with disabilities and they argue that disability simulations are akin to “non-Black students wearing blackface, males dressed as females, and straight, same-sex students holding hands” (p. 19) to understand what it is like to be Black, female, or gay.

The objections to disability simulations in disability studies scholarship are based on a number of arguments. First, as Valle and Connor (2011) assert, not only do these exercises fail to accurately simulate the lived experience of being disabled, they systematically misinform and create feelings of fear among nondisabled participants by temporarily allowing them to feel out of control. They explain, for example, that a sighted person when blindfolded is likely to experience a profound sense of disorientation or feel incapable. On the other hand, they argue, a congenitally blind person would hardly experience these feelings, and instead might feel competent, comfortable, and entirely oriented engaging in tasks in a familiar environment. If this is the case, then a “simulated blindness” would clearly fail to inform about the lived experience of blindness. Additionally, as Brew-Parrish (1997) states, children who participate in these simulations might experience feeling terrified or, at the very least, extremely uncomfortable, and when it is all over are likely to breathe a sigh of relief and feel thankful that they are not “saddled with a disability” in reality. Other objections to disability simulations are focused on the idea that they evoke feelings of pity for disabled people<sup>1</sup>, which are inconsistent with the disability rights community’s rejection of a pity-based discourse on disability and their demand for dignity and

respect (Brew-Parrish, 1997). Thus, disability simulations may leave nondisabled participants with a strengthened prejudice that life as a disabled person is to be avoided at all costs and a renewed affirmation that to be nondisabled, as they are, is indeed the only satisfying way to live. To be fair, disorientation, fear, and pity are not the only feelings evoked through participation in disability awareness programs, which often also include discussions of famous or “inspirational” people with disabilities. However, as Shapiro (1993) argues, these only serve to reinforce what he refers to as notions of the “supercrip” and perpetuate problematic narratives through their implication that achieving in spite of one’s disability is worthy of awe and admiration (p. 16).

Additionally, disability simulations are problematic because they provide the illusion that educators are addressing disability while they leave the most pertinent issues unaddressed (Valle & Connor, 2011). Like the proverbial elephant in the room, critical questions such as: “If we are all alike, then why we are not in the same classrooms,” and “Could I really be friends with *this* kid,” are unasked. The discomfort that the topic of disability engenders and the complicity of the able-bodied in the oppression of people with disabilities remain unchallenged. Disability simulations do little to teach children to think critically about societal attitudes that perpetuate ability-based segregation (Valle & Connor, 2011), nor do they expose students to viewpoints that challenge dominant discourses on disability. Thus, nondisabled privilege is reified by the very activities ostensibly designed to increase an understanding of individuals with disabilities.

### Whose Awareness, and Awareness of What?

Strong objections to disability simulation emerge not only from the disability studies scholarly community, but significantly, from within the disability rights activist community. As illustrative examples, we offer some of the efforts of the autistic activist community in the specific context of countering ableist attempts to “raise autism awareness.” We believe that these examples are particularly instructive due to the culture of violence against autistic people that we describe. As teacher educators, we believe that these disability rights activist efforts to engage with dominant ableist “awareness” campaigns have the potential to interrupt that culture of violence by posing two central questions about “disability awareness” campaigns that we must take up as teacher educators: Awareness of what? and Who gets to say? The activist efforts of the autistic community described here bring these questions into stark relief.

In 2007, the United Nations, spurred largely by the lobbying efforts of the organization Autism Speaks, passed a resolution declaring April 2nd World Autism Awareness Day. Central to these efforts has been the casting of “awareness” of autism as a global epidemic that must be eradicated (see Broderick, 2010). In contrast to these efforts, autistic activists have been particularly vocal and well-organized in their opposition to “autism awareness” days through several counternarrative initiatives. Silberman (2012) notes that the political efforts of many autistic activists seek to create “an era when their community no longer faces violence at home or discrimination in the workplace, in housing, in education, in the legal system, in health care, and in society at large” (p. 256). Indeed, as a “corrective” response to the “ubiquitous negative images we see every April,” autistic activist and blogger Paula Durbin-Westby proposed that April 2nd be recast as Autism Acceptance Day as “an occasion for promoting acceptance and understanding rather than vague ‘awareness,’ and be reclaimed as the day as an annual opportunity to celebrate their communities’ diversity and vitality” (Silberman, 2012, p. 256).

In addition to Autism Acceptance Day, in 2010, November 1st emerged among the autistic activist community as Autistics Speaking Day. Autistic blogger, Corina Becker, posted her objection to an autism awareness campaign called “Communication Shutdown” that was intended to simulate for non-autistic people the communication difficulties that autistic people face (by pledging to stay off of Twitter and Facebook for the day on November 1st). Becker (2010) notes the irony in trying to simulate autistic communication difficulty by refraining from select forms of electronic communication, when electronic communication is actually preferred by many autistic people as one of the most fluent forms and venues for expressive communication. Rather than focusing on the presumed absence of communication by and for autistic people, Autistics Speaking Day emerged as a counternarrative to draw attention to the existent, prolific, and powerful communication of autistic people worldwide.

Most recently, March 1, 2013 was observed by autistic activists and allies as a national Day of Mourning, in an attempt to raise public and media awareness of the many disabled people who experience violence at the hands of family members and caregivers each year. Day of Mourning began in 2012 as a joint effort of a number of different disability rights and disability activist groups in response to the death of George Hodgins, a 22-year-old autistic man from California who was murdered by his mother. While the initial Day of Mourning was prompted by Hodgins’s death in 2012, autistic blogger Gross (2013) explicates the unfortunate need for its ongoing observance due to continued violence against disabled people.

There are many more examples to be cited, but these three have emerged relatively recently as attempts within one specific sub-community of the disability rights movement to counter ableist disability awareness campaigns that actually harm, rather than help, the interests of disabled people, and to raise media awareness about disability oppression and discrimination routinely faced by disabled people.

In light of the strong condemnation of the use of disability simulations by many disability rights activists as well as by disability advocacy organizations and disability studies scholars (e.g., Valle & Connor, 2011), it is baffling that educational institutions continue to rely on these as pedagogical strategies for teaching about disability. Indeed, in the context of a society in which disability is associated with tragedy, burden, and unmitigated hardship, the necessity for lessons that, at the end of the day, only serve to confirm the biases we already hold, is a question that begs attention.

## Cultural and Institutional Ableism

The popular appeal of disability simulations becomes apparent when one considers the extent to which they are deeply embedded in cultural and institutional master narratives that are ableist in nature. Ableism refers to negative assumptions about the nature of living with a disability and uncritical beliefs about the superiority of the able-bodied existence (Hehir, 2002). Ableist assumptions are implicit in cultural narratives about disability as tragedy and life with a disability as not worth living.

Disability, within a medical model discourse, is most commonly conceptualized as impairment. However, in an emerging body of critical scholarship that frames disability as a social construct situated in cultural, political, and historical contexts, disability is positioned as human diversity rather than embodied deficits (Broderick & Ne’eman, 2008; Connor & Gabel, 2013).

Within the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990), disability is distinguished from, not equated with, impairment. Within the social model of disability, impairment refers to particular physical or sensory experience (e.g., blindness, absence of motor function), while disability or disablement refers to the political, economic, social, and cultural oppression that people with impairments experience. That is, disabled people are “a collective defined by common experiences of oppression” (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012, p. 27). This distinction between impairment and disablement goes largely unacknowledged and unexamined in much of teacher education, and so it is perhaps not surprising that the ubiquitous practice of simulating disability would be predominantly exercised as simulation of impairment, since the medical model of disability, which primarily conceptualizes disability as impairment, is dominant in both education and the broader culture (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012).

According to Nieto (1994), multicultural education should intentionally confront all forms of injustice and teach children to recognize privilege. Resonant of this idea, and extending the term multiculturalism to include the phenomenon of disability, we assert that if we are to prepare children to participate in democratic societies, they/we need to recognize all forms of inequalities and learn to challenge all forms of prejudice, including ableism. To this end, we need to prepare teachers who are able to disrupt dominant discourses on disability and to recognize and work to dismantle ableism.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in the tradition of qualitative inquiry (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). We present here a qualitative analysis of the meanings that graduate students bring to disability awareness programs and, in particular, the use of disability simulation exercises in schools. Documenting their interpretations of these practices at the beginning and end of the semester, this inquiry explores the ways in which those meanings shift. We interpret the findings in the context of the specific pedagogies and conceptual frameworks we employ, discussed in greater detail later in this section. The context of this inquiry is a graduate course in a school of education that is informed by critical disability studies perspectives as well as other critical perspectives on education, and employs strategies of experiential learning and social justice pedagogies. This analysis is situated within a broader exploration of the implications of this inquiry for teacher education and critically examines what role(s), if any, disability simulation can or should play in teacher education, in P-12 education, and in social justice education.

### Participants and Data Collection

This study is part of a broader inquiry in which the authors seek to critically reflect upon their own practices as teacher educators with regard to inclusive pedagogy; the data for this study are a subset of this broader inquiry. The participants were 25 graduate students who were enrolled in one section of a course instructed by the first author, entitled: *The Sociocultural Contexts of Disability and Inclusive Education*. This is a required course in several graduate programs at our university that lead to state certification as a Teacher of Students with Disabilities. This

course aims to orient students to the perspectives offered in disability studies and to stimulate critical discussion on individual, cultural, and institutional discourses and practices pertaining to the education of children with disabilities. By exploring sociocultural perspectives on disability, students critique the assumptions implicit in special and general education and consider that disability labels are not absolute categories, but rather, ones that are culturally defined and that reflect a differential balance of power and privilege in society. The conceptual distinction of impairment versus disability oppression is central to the course, as is an understanding of social justice pedagogy as that which works to actively engage with oppression and unequal relations of power. Furthermore, through this course, students learn to develop strategies for infusing critical disability perspectives into everyday classroom instruction and inclusive education practices and are expected to develop some understanding of school inclusion as a vehicle for equitable, socially just education and broader cultural and societal change.

Although the data for this study were collected from students enrolled in this required course, and although the pedagogical activities we employed were central to the course, it is important to note that students' participation in the study was not mandatory. This study met the rigorous standards of ethical review of human subject research at the authors' institution, and consistent with these, students were invited to either participate or to opt out anonymously during the process of obtaining informed consent. At the end of the semester, students were approached by a graduate research assistant who reviewed the purpose of the study and invited them to participate by simply submitting their written responses completed during class. Students who did not wish to participate could opt out by not submitting their written responses to the graduate assistant at the end of the semester. The authors had no way of knowing which students gave consent, since their response sheets contained no identifying information that could be linked to them. Random numerical identifiers were chosen by students, and these were used only so that we could compare their responses from the beginning to the end of the semester. All but one student voluntarily participated in the study.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study derive from in-class written reflections completed by the students: one at the start of the semester and another at the end of the semester, in which students wrote short essay-style responses on their views about the use of disability simulations and of disability awareness days in schools. At the beginning of the semester, students were asked to read an article featured in a local newspaper that reported on one school's effort to increase their student body's understanding and awareness of disability. The article described various disability simulation activities done during this disability awareness day, for instance, children smeared Vaseline on goggles and then attempted to navigate the environment; wore socks on their hands and tried to spread cream cheese on a cracker, and so on. The day also included a visit from a child with cerebral palsy who attended a nearby school, though the article did not mention what kind of educational program this child was receiving, inclusive or segregated. If the child was invited because there were no disabled students in the building (let alone as members of the classroom in question) it would suggest that the school or district may have relied, at least to some extent, on the practice of segregating disabled students. On the first day of this graduate class, students read



this article and engaged in a discussion about similar disability awareness programs of which they might be aware. They then provided a written reflection on this article.

Toward the end of the semester, volunteers from this class participated in a disability simulation as an in-class activity: for example, one was blindfolded and asked to deliver some documents to a professor's mailbox some distance away from the classroom, and another was asked to continue to take notes while having their hands bound. Other students observed and documented the volunteers' progress (and monitored them for safety) as they attempted to negotiate their environments and tasks. Students who had engaged in the simulations discussed and documented their feelings during and at the conclusion of the simulations. Following the in-class activity, all students reflected on and provided written responses to the same news article they had read on the first day of class.

Qualitative techniques were used to analyze the data. A content analysis was conducted on the two pieces of writing described above, which was completed by all students in the class. The written reflections were reviewed exhaustively, and all patterns and commonalities in students' perceptions were noted. Following this, codes were identified based upon frequency and consistency of particular perspectives or interpretations that existed across the data. Once the codes were identified, each student's written responses were coded. All of the data analysis was done by the authors.

## FINDINGS

We present our findings in two sections, organized temporally (data collected at the beginning of the semester versus data collected at the end of the semester), and inductively analyzed both within and across these two subsets of data. We characterize the students' collective initial responses to the practice of disability simulation as overwhelmingly positive and supportive: "A great idea," as one student noted. In contrast, we characterize the students' collective final responses to the practices of disability simulation as predominantly critical: "How insulting!" as one student succinctly put it. We begin by presenting the data gathered at the beginning of the semester, the night the students read the news article about disability simulations in a local school and recorded their narrative responses to this article and the simulation practices described therein.

### "A Great Idea": Students' Beliefs about Disability Simulations at the Start of the Semester

Students' reactions to the news article in which a local school district celebrated disability awareness day, which they read on the first day of class, were overwhelmingly positive. There was remarkable consistency across their written responses, in which they expressed strong support for the events and activities described, articulating, for instance, that such programs are a "great idea," and a "wonderful, exciting way" for children to learn about disabilities, and that they should be offered by more schools. In general, the idea of engaging children in disability simulations resonated well among students, and the reasons for their support of these fell into one of three thematic categories described below.

### *Simulations as Windows into the Lived Experiences of Disability*

The most frequently articulated reason for students' enthusiasm about the simulation exercises was their belief that simulations can be useful for nondisabled individuals in understanding the lived experiences of disability. Students expressed, for example, that simulation activities such as those described in the article "really helped children without disabilities to understand the lives of children with disabilities" and to think about "how it would be to live like another person who has a disability." Their responses point to their unquestioned assumption that the experience of disability is defined by the existence of impairment; thus, in their perceptions, temporarily simulating impairments served as ways of knowing "what students with disabilities go through on a daily basis."

However, a thorough qualitative analysis of data is incomplete if we focus our analysis exclusively on that which is present in the data. Absence also must be accounted for, as silences are an "integral part of strategies that underlie and permeate discourse" (Foucault, 1978/1990, p. 27). In students' responses, for example, that no accommodations were provided for children described in the article who were temporarily "disabled" and that the simulations therefore rendered those who engaged in them helpless or incapacitated was not questioned by anyone. Additionally, the idea that the lived experience of disability may encompass far more than negotiating tasks while having an impairment was likewise not raised. Despite their overwhelming enthusiasm for disability simulations as ways to "give children an idea of what it's like to have a disability," not one student considered the sociocultural and institutional contexts within which individuals exist, which undeniably also contribute to "what it's like" to live with a disability.

### *Simulations as Awareness of the "Challenges" of Being Disabled*

Many students' responses focused on the notion that disability simulations provide insights into the "obstacles," "struggles," and "challenges" that children with disabilities face. For instance, one student commended the school district discussed in the article for "acknowledging the hardships those with disabilities endure," and others believed that by highlighting the difficulties children with disabilities face, such activities could truly be "an eye-opening experience" for those who engage in them. Notably, their responses suggest that what students considered to be "eye-opening" (the irony of the use of this phrase by more than one student in discussing the benefits of simulating vision impairments should not be missed) was their heightened awareness of disability as unmitigated hardship, extreme challenge, and a burdensome life. Additionally, a few students believed that by drawing attention to the challenges of living with a disability, simulation activities would help nondisabled children gain appreciation for their own lives. For instance, one student wrote, "I loved the idea of this program because it would make [nondisabled] children be thankful for what they have, and understand and support the less fortunate children dealing with these hardships day to day."

Although many discussed "obstacles," not one student considered social, systemic, and attitudinal barriers to the full participation and inclusion of individuals with disabilities in schools and society as an obstacle. Similarly, the "challenges" faced by children with disabilities were understood as arising solely from their embodied impairments; individual, cultural, and institutionalized ableism was left entirely unacknowledged, and therefore unexamined.

### *Simulations as Strategies for Teaching Positive Social Values*

Disability simulations also were understood as effective ways to teach children empathy and acceptance of diversity. Some students articulated, for instance, that engaging in these simulations teaches children to be “compassionate for others” and can make children “more inviting of others who aren’t exactly like them.” Others articulated that there are important lessons to be learned from disability simulations, such as “treat all people equally and with respect” and “embrace our differences.”

However, in their responses they did not explain exactly how engaging in exercises that highlighted the “difficulties” and “struggles” of having a disability would make nondisabled children “embrace differences.” On the one hand simulations were seen as avenues for appreciating diversity, and on the other, they were seen as necessary for nondisabled children to appreciate their own lives and to learn to show compassion to those “less fortunate.” The implicit messages in disability simulations about the inherent superiority of the nondisabled existence and about the belief that individuals with disabilities, therefore, deserve compassion were not viewed by any student as inconsistent with the rhetoric of respect and diversity generated by the news article. We turn now to an analysis of the meanings students made of these simulations at the close of the semester.

### **“How Insulting!” Students’ Beliefs about Disability Simulations at the End of Semester**

Analysis of students’ responses at the end of the semester indicates significant shifts in their thinking with regard to the pedagogical use and implications of disability simulations; many students demonstrated awareness of the transformations in their own perspectives. As one student stated, “It is very shocking to see how drastically my perspective has changed during the course of the semester.” Of the 25 students who completed in the in-class written reflection at the end of the semester, 23 expressed highly negative views about the use of disability simulations. Overall, students took issue with disability simulations, raising strong objections to using these as a pedagogical strategy to teach children about disability. Their altered beliefs are discussed below, organized into the four thematic clusters of findings that emerged in their written responses.

### *Disability Simulations as Grounded in Deficit Thinking*

In their end-of-semester responses, the majority of students argued that simulations of the type described in the news article perpetuate predominantly negative attitudes and beliefs about the experience of disability. Some students argued that disability simulations teach and reinforce stereotypes, giving children “a completely biased and negative view of what it means to be disabled.” Others articulated that the simulations send the “wrong message” by promoting the idea that “people with disabilities are not able to do anything.” This is seen in the following response:

Simulation activities not only do NOT accurately represent what it is like to have a disability, but they misrepresent it in a way that perpetuates the stereotype that having a disability is difficult, frustrating, scary, and overall a negative attribute.

Some students raised concerns that disability simulations are deeply embedded in medical model conceptualizations of disabilities as biologically determined. They pointed out that because of their emphasis on impairments as defining the experience of disability, simulations may serve to equate disability with incapability and to obscure a “true picture” of a lived experience of disability. The notion that simulations give children a biased message that disability is embodied and that biological limitations define the experience is seen in this student’s comment: “Disability simulations cannot be performed without equating disability to deficit.” Another student argued that such simulations are “teaching the kids that disability is negative, terrible, and scary; all that we as teachers do not want our students to learn.”

### *Disability Simulation as “Othering” Disabled Students*

A second theme that emerged from the end-of-semester data was students’ belief that engaging in the simulations serves to reify notions of children with disabilities as “other,” as articulated here:

This program has singled out those with disabilities, told their peers that they are different from them, and shown that living without a disability means you have a better quality of life.

Elaborating further, many students expressed beliefs that disability simulations engender feelings of pity or that they carry an implicit message that we should “feel sorry” for people with disabilities because they have less desirable lives. As one student articulated: “[disability simulation] foster[s] the notion that to be able-bodied is SUPERIOR and that disability status is not merely a fact but a pitiable condition.” Another wrote, “By doing disability simulations with children, we are continuing the vicious cycle of pity on disability in society. We are teaching children all the negatives of disability.”

Some students expressed beliefs that the simulations would generate fear of disability among nondisabled children by allowing them to feel disoriented, isolated, and incapable for a brief amount of time, while others raised the idea that simulations may serve to reinforce disability labels or to lower expectations of children with disabilities by focusing solely on their impairments. These students perceived the implicit messages of sympathy, pity, and fear as counterproductive to the lessons they hoped to teach about disability as well as inconsistent with the demands of disability rights advocates for respect and equal status. For example, one student wrote, “I know that if I did this project with my third grade students the only thing that they would get out of it and go home and tell their parents would be, ‘Thank god I do not have a disability’ or ‘I am so much better because I am not disabled.’” Yet another wrote, “This would be a great lesson and activity if I wanted my students to leave with the feeling that those with disabilities have a miserable, difficult, and unfortunate life.”

### *Disability Simulations as Ableist Ideology*

A strong theme that emerged in relation to the first two pertains to students' emergent understandings that simulations are embedded in ableist notions: (a) about life with disability as a largely undesirable experience and (b) about the inherent superiority of nondisabled lives. Some students believed that by allowing children to experience difficulties doing everyday tasks, we might be teaching them to react negatively when they subsequently meet a child with a disability. One student wrote:

When you create a challenge like covering their eyes and "making them blind," of course they are going to say "it sucks!" . . . Then when they meet a person with a disability, they are going to think that person thinks their life sucks. We keep building a negative attitude.

Many students were able to locate the source of problematic messages in the nature of the activity itself, which they now believed seems to teach people that disability is a struggle and an obstacle to be overcome. Other students similarly expressed beliefs that disability simulations would only serve to reinforce among nondisabled children that they are "better off" than children with disabilities, thus positioning life with a disability as an undesirable existence:

These simulations are set up to teach students that having a disability is a terrible, challenging experience and that they should be grateful that they don't have to live like that, but admire their peers that do, for their courage, strength, and perseverance.

At the end of the semester, students identified these implicit messages as "clear examples of ableism," explicitly claiming that "doing disability simulations are [sic] creating ableism." Yet another student articulated the "take-away" lesson of disability simulation as:

Not only misleading but also inappropriate . . . These tasks perpetuate the ableism that we so strongly try to combat in inclusive education. Students would walk away feeling relieved and superior to those with disabilities.

### *Disability as Cultural Identity: Emergent Counter-Narratives*

Lastly, some students' responses focused not only on the negative messages inherent in disability simulations, but also on what is missing from the intended lessons—for example, the absence of their new perspectives on disability as identity marker. They articulated, for example, that by failing to situate disability in the broader context of diversity, simulations miss valuable opportunities to teach children about acceptance of human difference or, as one student pointed out, that disabled people are "a culture or a group of people [who] contribute to society in their own ways." Other students, whose responses were similarly informed by perspectives on disability as an identity marker, felt that attempts to simulate the experience of disability in such a superficial way was "insulting." Analogizing the simulations to efforts at raising awareness about other minority groups, this student remarked:

Imagine gathering kids together to "teach awareness of Latino-dom." In other words, in five minutes, I'm going to give the children a sense of what it is like to be Latino by serving them tacos or rice and beans. How insulting!

The data consistently indicate that students who began the course with the belief that disability simulations have the potential to teach children acceptance and respect ended the course believing that by instilling in children a “thankfulness” for being nondisabled, simulations would not only be counterproductive to the lessons they hoped to teach about accepting human differences but also would actively undermine the appreciation of diversity in classrooms. Overall, the students in this class demonstrated a clear and dramatic shift in their beliefs about disability simulations as a pedagogical tool for increasing understanding and acceptance of disability among children.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In analyzing these data, we found that students expressed an apparently significant and meaningful shift in their thinking about the meanings and, therefore, the value inherent in the performance of disability simulation for the purposes of raising awareness about disability in schools. However, to return to the title claim that Disability Awareness Days are often misguided, we wish to close with a discussion of our contention that awareness about particular issues or experiences is not neutrally “raised.” That is, “awareness” discourses are not merely reflective of a neutral, objective, or preexisting fact or state of affairs. Rather, from a Foucauldian perspective on discourse (Foucault, 1978/1990), the act of raising awareness about complex social constructs (such as disability) would perhaps be better described as actively constituting, rather than neutrally raising, particular, partial, and politically situated forms of awareness. By focusing cultural and societal awareness on certain facets of disability experience (e.g., on impairment) to the exclusion or obscuring of other facets of disability experience (e.g., disability oppression and discrimination), it becomes clear to us that dominant approaches to disability simulation (e.g., simulation of impairment) serve to constitute and reproduce, rather than to disrupt, disability oppression. Instead, if we wish to employ a social justice pedagogical approach on the question of disability awareness, then the central critical questions that we must raise become those raised by the disability rights community itself: Awareness of what? and Who gets to say?

In considering these questions, there is a stark distinction between the disability awareness efforts initiated by nondisabled people and those initiated by disability rights activists. The former are almost uniformly focused on raising awareness of impairment, and at best, aimed at fostering tolerance of individuals who experience that impairment. In sharp contrast, disability awareness campaigns initiated by disabled people themselves and disability rights activist groups, such as these examples noted in the introduction section of this article, tend to focus their efforts on valuing disability and on raising awareness of disability oppression and discrimination.

What are the implications of this inquiry for teacher education, and by extension, for the use of disability simulation in K-12 schools? One of the student respondents asserted at the close of the semester that “disability simulations cannot be performed without equating disability to deficit.” Although we are pleased with the lens of critique that the student brought to bear on disability simulations at the close of the semester, a lens that had been largely absent at the semester’s outset, we nonetheless cannot concur with the student’s conclusion that “disability simulations cannot be performed without equating disability to deficit.”

If we were to concede that disability is equated with impairment (which we do not), we perhaps might concur with our student’s declaration that disability (i.e., impairment) simulation cannot be performed by nondisabled people without equating disability with deficit. However, because

we do not conceptualize disability as impairment, we do not concede this point, and argue, rather, that there may be some utility for nondisabled learners in experiencing simulations of disability oppression, or disablement. If the particular, partial, and politically situated perspective that gets to say what constitutes disability awareness continues to be dominantly informed by a medical model of disability (conceptualized not only as impairment but as deficit), then perhaps our student is correct in saying that the performance of simulation activities can only equate disability with deficit. However, when our conceptualization of disability includes as a central organizing conceptual framework the experience of disability oppression, then awareness constituting activities can take entirely different, and considerably more politically emancipatory, directions.

Simulating disability oppression is a more complex and challenging prospect than is simulating impairment and may not be accomplished by something as simple as smearing Vaseline on a pair of glasses, putting socks on one's hands while performing a fine motor task, or refraining from using Facebook and Twitter for a day. Simulations of disability oppression require a much more thoughtful and complex consideration of what Charlton (1998) refers to as the "sociocultural" and "political-economic" nature of disability oppression (p. 23). Nevertheless, because experiential learning can be a powerful and transformative tool for teacher education, we feel that the question of how to experientially simulate disability oppression is one worth giving considered thought.

Rather than throwing out the idea of disability simulation altogether, we propose recasting it as a powerful tool of social justice pedagogy with which to enable teacher candidates to think more critically about and, indeed, to work to disrupt the sociocultural and political-economic dimensions of disability oppression. What if, instead of being blindfolded and asked to move around the classroom, or being asked to wheel around a school of education in a wheelchair for 15 minutes, or being asked to sort some papers with socks on their hands, our teacher candidates were actually invited to consider the nature of disability oppression and to create experiences for themselves that begin to approximate a simulation of some small facet of that experience? For example, what if a student were to give him- or herself the experience of attempting to hail a cab on Broadway in New York City at rush hour while sitting in a wheelchair on the curb? How long might that take, and how likely might it be for an apparently disabled person to get to their evening engagement on time compared to a nondisabled peer? What if a student were to wear a dark pair of glasses and carry a white cane while going out for the afternoon, shopping or to a restaurant, with a friend or partner? How long would it be before the waiter or sales associate turned to the friend or partner, directing their remarks, questions, eye contact, and attention, to the nondisabled companion rather than the person appearing to be visually impaired? What if a student went out to a social gathering for an evening with friends, resolving to exclusively communicate through typing on a smartphone or iPad at a pace of one keystroke per second? How long might it be before even their friends began to converse around them, with only carved out invitations to participate in yes/no or other short or limited responses? What if they were to use any of these performative devices (e.g., sitting in a wheelchair, carrying a white cane, not speaking and using a communication device to type), designed to create for nondisabled onlookers the appearance of a disabled identity, and enter into a rental property manager's office requesting an application to lease a vacant apartment? Or to enter into a place of business and request an application for employment? What if they were to create a profile of themselves on an online dating site in which they explicitly identified as disabled? How many "matches" would they get? Might they then have some small sense of the experience of disability oppression? In

what ways might their awareness of disablement have been raised through such experiences? We contend that when recast in these ways, simulations may indeed have some value; the simulations we suggest allow those who engage in them to retract their gaze from biological impairments and to focus instead on disability oppression. Thus, they situate the meaning and experience of disability in socio-political contexts and in able-bodied privilege.

Some of these examples are hypothetical; the majority are experiences that our students actually created for themselves when challenged to simulate the experience of disability oppression. Of course, none of these experiences can authentically simulate the experience of disability oppression, and there are many facets of it that simply cannot be simulated, including some that it could be unethical or even unsafe to simulate for students (e.g., the experience of bullying, harassment, and both the threat and the actual experience of violence against one because one is disabled). Nevertheless, disabled people do not have the luxury of experiencing only the “safe” forms of disability oppression. However, we wonder if we might not perhaps do better in teacher education with simulating disability (and by that we mean simulating disability oppression) in the interest of not merely raising disability awareness (and by that we mean awareness of disability oppression), but actually mitigating ableism in schools through this and other forms of social justice pedagogy.

Teacher education has long been engaged in transformative efforts, particularly in critical multiculturalism, to move beyond conceptualizations of diversity that are grounded in assumptions of deficit and devaluing (Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 1998; Nieto, 1994). It is worth noting that we would not tolerate attempts to “raise awareness” about other forms of diversity in schools that rely on explicitly discriminatory underlying narrative tropes (e.g., “Boys, aren’t you happy you’re not female?” “Native born students, aren’t you happy you’re not an immigrant?” “White students, aren’t you happy you’re not people of color?”), and yet we have long unquestioningly continued to rely upon the discriminatory “aren’t you glad you’re not disabled?” narrative.

Although we acknowledge that awareness efforts that seek to not only tolerate but actually value, rather than actively devalue, disabled people’s experiences (such as Autism Acceptance Day) are a vast improvement over actively discriminatory deficit narratives, we argue that they are nevertheless vastly inadequate as social justice pedagogies until and unless they actively engage and seek to dismantle ableist oppression. According to Hackman (2006), a social justice agenda must create “opportunities for social action in the service of social change. Clearly, this definition goes well beyond the celebration of diversity” (p. 104). However, although there is growing acknowledgment of the need to address issues connected to racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of discrimination and prejudice in schools, the vast majority of educators remain unlikely to consider the impact of ableism on students and society. As such, ableism remains a “permissible prejudice” (Chodorow, 1999, para. 2), and one that has been perceived as somehow outside of social justice education. In contrast, we concur with Connor and Gabel (2013) that “cripping the curriculum is a form of social justice pedagogy” (p. 113) and argue that it is time for social justice education to actively engage with ableist oppression as well.

After one semester, our students were able to recognize and name ableist ideology at work in common school practices. We read their transformation in their understandings of the use of disability simulations with great optimism—and as a call to all educators to engage in transformative social justice pedagogies that actively confront ableism in schools and to position the teaching of anti-ableism, alongside already existing anti-racist and anti-heteronormative initiatives, as a central aspect of social justice education.



## NOTE

1. Although “person-first” language (e.g., “person with a disability”) was originally intended by many in the disability rights self-advocacy movement to be emancipatory in nature by declaring that individuals with disability labels are “people first,” we do not exclusively adhere to person-first syntax. Rather, and in solidarity with a growing segment of the disability rights community, we often employ “identity-first” syntax (e.g., “disabled people”), which positions disability as a central, integral, and valued facet of a person’s identity, rather than as a separate—and possibly negative—entity or appendage. For further discussion on this nuanced and complex issue, please see Broderick and Ne’eman (2008), Baglieri and Shapiro (2012), and Brown (2013).

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