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Disability and Authentic Leadership in the Classroom: A Qualitative Undergraduate Case Study

Handicap et leadership authentique en classe: Étude de cas qualitative auprès d'étudiants de premier cycle

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Abstract
Medical, moral, and social perspectives of disability have evolved, creating certain stigmas and stereotypes of this minority community, including the university undergraduate disabled student population. Authentic leadership can aid in restoring the social experiences of the disabled community in learning settings (Procknow et al., 2017; Procknow & Rocco, 2021). A qualitative phenomenological case study was conducted examining the lived experiences of a disabled undergraduate community within the theoretical perspective of authentic leadership and the methodological perspectives within the domains of Critical Disability Studies in the faculty/student relationship. The results of this study may further improve the use of authentic leadership within educational techniques and approaches in the undergraduate classroom for disabled learners.

Résumé
Les perspectives médicales, morales et sociales du handicap ont évolué, créant certains stigmates et stéréotypes à l'égard de cette communauté minoritaire, notamment des étudiants handicapés de premier cycle universitaire. Un leadership authentique peut contribuer à restaurer les expériences sociales de la communauté handicapée dans les contextes d'apprentissage (Procknow et al., 2017; Procknow et Rocco, 2021). Une étude de cas phénoménologique qualitative a été menée pour examiner les expériences vécues d'une communauté d'étudiants handicapés dans la perspective théorique du leadership authentique et les perspectives méthodologiques des études critiques sur le handicap dans la relation professeurs-étudiants. Les résultats de cette étude pourraient améliorer l'utilisation du leadership authentique dans les techniques et approches pédagogiques en classe de premier cycle pour les apprenants handicapés.

Keywords
Authentic leadership, relational transparency, disability, critical disability studies, faculty/student relationship

Mots-clés
Leadership authentique, transparence relationnelle, handicap, études critiques sur le handicap, relation professeurs/étudiants

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2020), one in four adults, or approximately 61 million Americans in the United States, have a diagnosed and classified disability. Those numbers rose even more two years later when the National Institute of Health (NIH) indicated in a 2022 study that the disability community represents more than 27% of the U.S. adult population, making that community the single largest minority group in the country. In a news release, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023) estimated that in 2022, 21.3% of individuals with a disability had employment, an increase from 19.1% in 2021 (para. 1). Narrowing the focus within the disability community, research conducted in 2016 yielded that approximately 19% of undergraduate university students officially reported having a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d).

The phenomenon of disability is a complex and complicated social paradigm that challenges the cultural relevance and posture of the disability community within society (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017). Intertwined within the concept and issues of humanity and societal acceptance (Procknow & Rocco, 2021), authentic leadership (AL) is a multilayered social phenomenon of leader behavior informing positive psychological capabilities and a practical, ethical climate providing enhanced "self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency" (Walumbwa et al., 2008, p. 94).

Problem Statement

Goodley (2013) notes that disability is a phenomenon entangled within oppression. Stigma centered on persons with disabilities results in the marginalization of that community (Barclay et al., 2012). These stigmas create various factors and misnomers

influenced by the ongoing development within understanding disability, including the somewhat binary nature of the social model of disability, producing the distinction between disability and impairment with growing discrimination within social perception (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017). While most universities have disability support offices (DSOs) to level the playing field for students with disabilities (SWD) by providing classroom and homework accommodations, disabled students experience isolation, insecurity, disempowerment, and discouragement (Francis et al., 2019). Additionally, research indicates that disabled students experience exclusion and segregation throughout their college tenure, creating the need for more inclusive initiatives and programs (Higbee et al., 2010).

Suggested strategies include university critical inclusion assessments for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities to enable positive experiences and relationships (Oakes et al., 2021). Procknow and Rocco (2021) highlight that little research has advanced the conversation between PWD and AL. Consequently, the literature draws potential connections between Critical Disability Studies (CDS) and AL, specifically within cultural perception and pathological limitation (Procknow et al., 2017; Procknow & Rocco, 2021; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017).

Purpose and Research Question

In the present paper, this study explores the undergraduate student disability community through the use of AL theory, enhancing the developing story of a marginalized community and their perception of leader transparency (Procknow et al., 2017; Procknow & Rocco, 2021) within the faculty/student relationship. The research question of this study is: How do students with disabilities describe their lived classroom

experience with the faculty-led relational transparency element of authentic leadership within their first academic year at a university in the United States? By exploring this question, the study aims to determine if pedagogical implementation of AL and relational transparency can connect within the domains of CDS and significantly impact a marginalized student community within the classroom setting.

The Conceptual Framework: Critical Disability Studies

Disability is a subset of diversity that describes any individual with a physical or mental impairment substantially limiting one or more major life activities (ADA National Network, n.d.). This classification includes “all physical (i.e., from birth or accidental), psychiatric, neurological, and mental challenges an individual may possess” (ADA National Network, n.d., para. 2). Many types of disabilities affect an individual’s (a) vision, (b) movement, (c) thinking, (d) remembering, (e) learning, (f) communicating, (g) hearing, (h) mental health, and (i) social relationships (CDC, 2020). Additionally, the CDC (2020) highlights the World Health Organization’s position that disability includes three dimensions: (a) impairment, (b) activity limitation, and (c) participation restrictions.

A particular disability may relate to conditions identified at birth that may affect functioning later in life, such as mobility, cognition, behavior, hearing, vision, and others. These conditions include chromosomal, genetic, and exposure in the womb (CDC, 2020). A disability may also be developmental or neurological, such as autism spectrum disorder, related to an injury such as a traumatic brain injury, part of a longstanding condition such as diabetes, or a progressive state like muscular dystrophy (CDC, 2020).

Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2017) define CDS as a “post-conventional theoretical approach [that] seeks to extend and productively critique the achievements

of working through more modernist paradigms of disability, such as the social constructionist model" (p. 49). Goodley et al. (2019) contends that the "the emergence of Critical Disability Studies is driven, in part, by a strong poststructuralist tradition that rearticulated disability as cultural and discursive politics" (p. 975). There have been differing scholarly opinions and countering points of view as to the nature and pejorative meaning of CDS in providing a singular meaning-making definition of disability in society (Goodley et al., 2019). Rather, CDS represents a theoretical launchpad for theories and perspectives (Goodley et al., 2019).

CDS represents the larger, more conceptual, universal, and overarching scholarly collective of literature and studies that inform diverse perspectives and theories, providing a wider scholastic net within social justice (Goodley et al., 2019). CDS is a methodology that bridges theoretical concerns and practical applications within a predominantly psychological, cultural, and social activism paradigm (Goodley, 2013; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017). This methodological approach provides a grounded and informed philosophical focus within thinking critically toward an altered perspective of the world (Schalk, 2017). Consequently, the study focuses on how CDS connects with the participants' experiences within the AL paradigm for determining and understanding a disabled individual's posture and standing in society—specifically by studying the: (a) social, (b) multidimensional, (c) diverse language, and (d) giving voice domains (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017).

These four CDS paradigm areas provide a baseline for examining public acceptance and trends within disability perspectives. The social domain includes societal and environmental factors such as attitudes, institutions, and structures that

play a role and create obstacles within the lived experiences of the disabled community (Timke, 2023). The multidimensionality of disability is the acceptance of identity along a dualistic intersecting dis/abled reality, providing meaning-making (Hernandez-Saca et al., 2018). The diverse language domain addresses the diminished language of disability blurbs, accessibility statements, definitions, and the nature of CDS terminology discourse itself (Minich, 2016). Ashby (2011) posits that giving voice represents the desire of the disability community to be viewed as competent through the power of being seen and heard. This study explores the experiences of disabled students in the classroom environment, utilizing AL as the theoretical framework, as impacted by the perspectives found within the domains of CDS.

Higher Education and Disability Response

Universities need critical assessment and programming, including students with disabilities, enabling positive experiences and relationships (Oakes et al., 2021). Connor et al. (2008) contend that disability studies in education (DSE) research creates a more inclusive environment within perceptions, attitudes, and intersectionality. Research indicates that disabled students still experience exclusion and segregation throughout their college tenure, creating the need for more inclusive approaches (Higbee et al., 2010).

Students' lived experiences with disabilities also affect classroom accommodation initiatives, based upon "the faculty's willingness to comply" and students' willingness to share their situations (Oakes et al., 2021, p. 80). Qualitative interview data from disabled students indicate that the lack of faculty training is part of why disabled students sometimes struggle (Francis et al., 2019). Core gaps in disability

higher education include inadequate tools for disability support services staff in training disabled students in self-advocacy (Summers et al., 2014).

Studies that center on leadership styles engaging in diversity and inclusion efforts in higher education, specifically with faculty, are gaining traction (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002). Additional studies indicate that faculty must adjust their pedagogies toward inclusion by engaging in and creating a socially just teaching philosophy (Madriaga et al., 2011). Universities are initiating leadership strategies within diversity of difference, recognizing that various social identities can affect the function and role of leadership in higher education (Owen, 2009). More recently, a study conducted in 2017 in the United Kingdom yielded that, “despite an evident dearth of ‘official’, designated, academic leadership preparation and/or development provision, professors were resourceful in drawing upon their experience, networks and intellectual capacity to develop ways of becoming and being effective members of the professoriate” (Evans, 2017, p. 123).

The Theoretical Framework: Authentic Leadership and Relational Transparency

A theoretical framework centers on a theory-based approach and mindset that allows hypothesis testing and design-produced data within emerging principles (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Authentic leadership (AL) is a multidimensional phenomenon of leader behavior informing positive psychological capabilities, providing enhanced “self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency” (Walumbwa et al., 2008, p. 94). The resulting phenomenon of AL displays a developmental process, informing heightened levels of followers’ self-awareness and self-regulation, resulting in positive outcomes (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Through this lens, authentic leaders experience success by supporting and embracing the shared identity of their followers (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Steffens et al., 2016). Additionally, AL centers on ethical relativism within the alignment of the leader and follower's value systems (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Sidani & Rowe, 2018).

This leader-follower symbiotic relationship within behavioral moral coding and heightened levels of psychological well-being distinguishes AL from other positive leadership theories, such as transformational leadership (Banks et al., 2016; Sidani & Rowe, 2018). Rego et al. (2013) indicated that AL positively affects team engagement and virtuousness, informing positive organizational scholarship (POS). AL also informs transparent communication systems, improving relationships, trust, and satisfaction (Linjuan & Stacks, 2014). Transparent communication and engagement are core mediators between observational and perceived AL (Jiang & Shen, 2020).

A conceptual framework is a series of related concepts that explain various social phenomena (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Within the theory of AL, relational transparency incorporates "showing one's true self to others, expressing true thoughts and emotions, and openly sharing information" (Rego et al., 2021). Studies indicate that humility is an essential component of relational transparency and is effective only when leader-to-follower and follower-to-leader observe characteristics with each other—in other words, the phenomenon must be bidirectional (Rego et al., 2021). Relational transparency also mitigates unnecessary and unreasonable tasks, allowing leaders to break cycles of mediocracy and promote greater job satisfaction with employees (Muntz et al., 2019). This study focuses on the construct of relational transparency within the theoretical

framework of AL, exploring the lived experiences and impact of CDS within the disabled student community.

Authentic Leadership and Disability: Connecting the Variables

As seminal authors making the scholastically unique connection between AL and disability, thus serving as a model and guide for this paper, Procknow and Rocco (2021) maintain that the constructs of AL could create a social understanding of persons with disabilities (PWD) due to *other* norming that has marginalized PWD in general. This phenomenon of *othering* creates the construct of ableism, centering on an idealized cultural position of systemic preclusion (Procknow & Rocco, 2021). The social trend of viewing PWD as a categorical segment of the population has created the ideation that individuals without a disability or any impairment are culturally normative, creating a system of acceptance counterproductive to AL's theoretical tenets (Procknow & Rocco, 2021). Procknow and Rocco (2021) contend that this societal perspective conflicts with the AL imperatives of interpersonal relationships, ethics, beliefs, and self-awareness and proliferates the PWD *other* stigma organizationally and culturally.

However, Procknow and Rocco (2021) note that AL is a conduit toward relationally restoring the social experiences of the disabled community because AL engages self-awareness and cognitive trust in mental states, motives, convictions, feelings, and cognitions. As such, a self-aware leader displaying AL centers on establishing inclusive relationships and being mindful of diversity as a core construct within the four dimensions of the theoretical model of AL (Procknow & Rocco, 2021). Within that framework, AL techniques mitigate the disability-causing pathological phenomena of burnout and decrease the symptoms of disability in the workplace

(Procknow & Rocco, 2021). Authentic leaders display compassion towards PWD, mitigating workplace marginalization and the sense of *other* PWD observe (Procknow & Rocco, 2021). There are also conflicting issues between PWD and AL within the realm of centralizing normativity, prototypical identity, disability disclosure, and the social construct of imperfection (Procknow & Rocco, 2021). Individuals who practice the AL approach have the potential for transformational growth outside their ingrained beliefs and perceptions of disability and ability, engaging within a more inclusive environment (Procknow & Rocco, 2021).

Research Methods and Procedures

This research was a complex look inside a social phenomenon within the fixed setting of the classroom environment. The study derives an ontological constructionist approach through epistemological interpretivism, which informs social phenomena' individuality, uniqueness, and meaning-making (Bryman, 2016). This context provides the philosophical underpinnings for exploring the experiences of PWD within perceived authentic leadership behaviors (Bryman, 2016). Additionally, qualitative data focuses on naturally transpiring, regular events, reflecting the lived experiences of individuals within a social world and providing a potential strategy for further exploring life and deepening hypotheses (Miles et al., 2019). The logical rationale for data discovery within this context adequately merges unique lived experiences within a relatively controlled classroom environment. Within the context of this study several factors came into play, notably the need to secure participant anonymity, the small size of the population pool as well as the participating institution, and the need to explore in-depth understanding of a specific social phenomena with the need to identity themes and patterns (Creswell,

2013). As such, a qualitative phenomenological case study served as an appropriate study design.

The Participants

The population interviewed included undergraduate students with seen and unseen disabilities who had completed their first academic year at the university in a classroom setting. Demographic information was not obtained, mitigating the possibility of participant identification and preserving the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. Privacy is critical, as there is a limited student body at the case study university and an even smaller disabled undergraduate student population, increasing the probability of breaches of participant confidentiality. Even disclosing the participants' specific disability lessens the quality of anonymity; therefore, no identifying markers will be discussed in this study's data analysis section. The 10 participants represent a rich presence within the disability spectrum, with physical, mental, and cognitive disabilities represented. The participants have pseudo names utilizing alphabet letters A to J for identification and referencing.

Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interview questions from the AL and relational transparency portion of the ALQ inform the leadership theoretical framework and developed qualitative interview questions (Avolio et al., 2007; Mind Garden, n.d.). As the leading and primary assessment tool for authentic leadership research, the various dimensions of the ALQ indicate validation, determining that the instrument is positively related to outcomes such as organizational commitment, citizenship, and performance satisfaction (Mind Garden, n.d.). There were

three questions focused on the AL construct of relational transparency, three focused on the domains of CDS, and an open-ended seventh question that provided any additional observations.

Procedures

Before the interview, students signed an informed consent document. The interviews were “informal, interactive, and open-ended” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). Interviewers sat on a couch facing the researcher, who recorded the interview with an audio recording device. Field notes identified any non-verbal cues utilizing a codex of pre-designated symbols representing various emotional or physical observations. A cellular phone was also used to record the session as a safeguard. The recordings were downloaded from the recording device and archived on a laptop in a cloud system. An outside vendor transcribed the audio files. GoTranscript offers transcription services, charging per minute, and transforms audio files into written text files with a short turnaround time (GoTranscript, n.d.-a). Finally, the data was uploaded to a QDA software program for analysis.

Data Analysis

All field data, including audio, visual, transcribed, and handwritten field data from the interviews, were transferred into a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program or CAQDAS (Bryman, 2016). This coding process saved time and provided integrated categorical outputs for qualitative data retrieval (Bryman, 2016). Miles et al. (2019) posited that qualitative data analysis coincided with data collection, allowing for early pattern and theme detection. Codes are “labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (Miles et al., 2019, p.

62). First and second-cycle coding assigns codes to data units and then further analyzes the data units for relationships, patterns, themes, and hypotheses (Miles et al., 2019). Considering that all participants have a disability and have been in the classroom their first year at the university, it may be reasonable to assume that themes may appear within the data.

Through the extrapolation of the qualitative data within the NVivo software, patterns, connections, and relationships within the data emerge, expositing the lived experiences of disabled undergraduate students in the classroom setting concerning faculty-led relational transparency. The results reflect the AL literature within observational relational transparency and indicate patterns with observations in connection with the scholarly literature on disability studies. Additionally, the study results better understand the relationship between organizational leadership and higher education. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) highlighted that the “unique nature of an interview study should pose a challenge to the researcher to describe as precisely as possible the specific steps, procedures, and decisions taken in the specific study”, and thus, provides the study with “intriguing knowledge” (p. 305).

Additionally, qualitative research should be sensitive to the context, transparent and coherent, have commitment and rigor, and have impact and importance (Bryman, 2016). While ensuring that the qualitative interview data is trustworthy, there are challenges in maintaining credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability within the research methodology. Specific care was taken to ensure that respondent verification was achieved, IRB approval was achieved, biases were mitigated, field notes were taken, and that interview questions were reviewed and accepted by a

disability studies expert. Additionally, steps were taken to achieve what Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) described as *phronesis*, or recognizing and responding within the interview process.

Findings

This next section explores the 10 participants' responses to the seven questions of the study relating to authentic leadership, relational transparency, and CDS. Responses explore unique stories, identifying connecting patterns, and coding relationships between AL and the perspectives within CDS. It should be noted that all participants answered the interview questions within the lens and perspective of their disability. Because of the small population size, disclosing each participant's disability ran the risk of identification. As all participants who participated in the study were officially registered with the university's Learning Center, professors were aware of any students in their classes who needed accommodations.

Question One: Students and Professor Authenticity

Question one asked, "In the classroom, what have your experiences and observations been with professors being their authentic, real selves?" This portion of the interview engaged with the authentic leadership construct of relational transparency. Four of the 10 participants indicated that their professors have always been authentic in the classroom. Within this category, Participant E explained that they "can see it in the way they talk; it's not so artificial. It's like they want to get to know us a lot and be there to support us emotionally and academically and spiritually as well" (personal communication, February 2, 2023).

Six participants responded that professor authenticity in the classroom depended on the type of class and the typology of professor qualities. Participant B reflected that authenticity varied because “it is all about personalities” (personal communication, January 31, 2023). The participant noted that the professor was “very much like [course content], other than that, goodbye” (personal communication, January 31, 2023). Participant G also expressed that authenticity in the classroom depended on whether the professor talked about their lives and shared their experiences and struggles. This participant shared that if a professor is open to being real in the classroom, it helps them feel more comfortable sharing their struggles or asking when they might need help. Participant G said that one of the most prominent displays of authenticity they have ever experienced from a professor was when the professor cried with them.

Participant D continued saying that when a professor shares about themselves, it is “really helpful to the overall community in the classroom. I think students feel more comfortable sharing in those scenarios; I know I personally do” (personal communication, February 1, 2023). This participant also noted that students view an authentic professor “as someone who can be trusted; someone who is willing to take us seriously, which I think is really helpful as a student” (personal communication, February 1, 2023).

Participant C had experienced professors “trying to put a Band-Aid on me” (personal communication, February 1, 2023) when the participant shared that they were struggling. Participant A explained that the authentic professors they have had “honestly cared for the students, and you could tell they were confident in their teaching style and ability” (personal communication, January 31, 2023). Participant A reflected that these

professors “taught in a way that gave us a different angle to the way the material can be taught, which I think was really beautiful” (personal communication, January 31, 2023). Conversely, Participant A reflected that with most professors, “it does feel very cut and dry. The professor is just spitting out content, and you don’t really get a sense of who they are” (personal communication, January 31, 2023).

Question Two: Professors and Mistakes

The second interview question was, “In the classroom, what are your experiences of faculty admitting their mistakes?” With this question based on relational transparency, one stand-out story came from Participant H, who shared that one of their professors displayed great grace when the participant made a mistake. Participant H noted that the professor's handling of the situation “changed how [the participant] perceived their consistency” (personal communication, February 3, 2023). Participant H also appreciated how their professors “had been able to readjust their perception in a way that’s helpful” (personal communication, February 3, 2023) regarding the participant’s diagnosis and resulting struggle in class.

While most participants indicated that their professors admit their mistakes in class, usually centered on logistical and management errors, some professors are harder to acquiesce in the more meaningful discussion-based conversations. Participant G shared that they have had “professors who were very stubborn about admitting mistakes and, instead, it came across as harsh and very intimidating when they got defensive over a mistake” (personal communication, February 3, 2023). Conversely, Participant H’s story of how one of their professors exhibited a high amount of grace

was significant as the participant referenced the “perception of consistency” (Participant H, personal communication, February 3, 2023) observed from the follower to the leader.

Question Three: Professors and Feelings

Question three was, “Have you observed your professors openly sharing their feelings in the classroom?” In the last relational transparency question, most participants indicated that whether a professor shares their feelings with their class depends on the class type (i.e., in major courses, the professor tends to share more) and the professor’s personality. Participant G explained that because their major and classes have a smaller student body, “there’s more opportunity for professors to share their feelings” (personal communication, February 3, 2023). Participant G also said it is refreshing when professors share their feelings “because it’s just nice to know how people think and not guess” (personal communication, February 3, 2023).

Additional factors include the professor’s ability to maintain boundaries, their years of experience, how long the students have known the professor, and whether they have had the professor for more than one class. These qualities produce a strong connection between the students and the professors, and as Participant A shared, whether a connection is fostered or not, a “feedback loop” is created, and where the same energy offered gets reciprocated between leader and follower (personal communication, January 31, 2023).

Question Four: Professors and Language

The fourth question was, “In the classroom, what is your experience with your professors using inclusive or discriminatory language? This next section of the interview experience centered on CDS. Four of the 10 participants indicated that their professors

did not use discriminatory language and were verbally inclusive. Participant F explained further that if their professors did happen to say something potentially offensive, they would immediately apologize and correct themselves before continuing with the class lecture. This participant also shared that when the professor corrected themselves in that manner, it created a mutual understanding between the professor and the students. Participant E shared that they actively reached out to their professors, routinely meeting with them after class to get to know them better, and shared their learning styles and differences. Because of this initiative, Participant E felt their professors “accepted me as a whole” (personal communication, February 2, 2023). Participant B shared that professors were inclusive with their language in the classroom and highlighted that the professor encouraged conversations in specific classes focusing on storytelling. As Participant B worded it, in these classes, “we can become ourselves” (personal communication, January 31, 2023).

The remaining six participants shared that they have experienced various inclusive and discriminatory language from their professors in the classroom. Participant C shared that they encountered professors who did not understand their specific disability, which triggered uncomfortable conversations about the accommodations they needed to be successful. Phrases from professors like “oh, here’s an extension” (personal communication, February 1, 2023) came up often, making the participant further discuss their situation. Participant C explained that professors do not understand that disability accommodation is not a “one size fits all fix” (personal communication, February 1, 2023) for students.

In a stand-out example, Participant A explained that some professors "didn't try to understand my disability; they instead tried to figure out if I truly even *had* a disability" (personal communication, January 31, 2023). Participant A identified two classes, physical education and self-defense, that were especially difficult to navigate with the professor regarding in-class accommodations. After meeting resistance, someone suggested that the student bring their X-rays and medical records to class to show their professor, as evidence, in front of the rest of the class. Participant A shared that many of their professors had not experienced many interactions with a disabled person. As a result, they did not know how to word things to disabled students, which sometimes resulted in callous conversations. Participant G shared that professors do not understand "the vast spectrum of cognitive disabilities" (personal communication, February 3, 2023). Conversely, Participant G also shared that the professors in their major courses are very inclusive with their language in the classroom, even highlighting that those professors say they want to "champion" (personal communication, February 3, 2023) them to succeed.

Participant J experienced professors who did not see or understand their disability. Participant J attributed this unawareness to "society at large" (personal communication, February 8, 2023), minimizing the condition and incorrectly generalizing symptoms. Participant J has faced language such as, "Well, why don't you focus harder?", "That's not really like that much of an issue," and "You just need to buckle down or grin and bear it" (personal communication, February 8, 2023). Participant H has "stayed away" (personal communication, February 3, 2023) from certain classes because the subject matter represented them and their disability. Participant H

explained that because their disability is relatively unknown, they sometimes have neglected their privacy and have shared about their disability, even if they do not feel safe, to combat the stigmas surrounding the condition.

Question Five: Professors and Diversity

The fifth question in the interview was, “In the classroom, what have been your experiences with the professors talking about or embracing diversity? Four of the 10 participants indicated that their professors encouraged different viewpoints, creating an open class environment by ensuring everyone was comfortable. Participant J, who earlier shared about the professor who questioned their attentiveness in class and stood behind them, also shared that the experience changed how they advocated for themselves moving forward. Since that experience, Participant J has actively communicated with their professors and has explained how their disability affects them in the classroom. As a result, this participant’s professors have been understanding and accepting. Participant F acknowledged that most professors are inclusive in the classroom, saying, “It doesn’t matter how you look; that doesn’t mean you didn’t go through something” (personal communication, February 2, 2023). Participant F did say that stereotypes do exist, though, especially with the stigmas of specific disabilities.

Six out of the 10 participants indicated that while professors discussed diversity in the classroom, they did not include disability. Participant B explained that “you often don’t see much talk surrounding disability” (personal communication, January 31, 2023), and Participant G shared that classroom conversations mainly centered on cultural diversity. Participant G also said that people forget about the other forms of diversity, even though they are just as important, making them “feel left out and unseen”

(personal communication, February 3, 2023). Conversely, Participant G did share that when a professor does acknowledge disabilities in the classroom, they feel a lot less isolated. Participant C said that in the context of diversity, disability "gets swept under the rug" (personal communication, February 1, 2023).

Participant D felt like there has been a push lately with the university to embrace diversity; however, there has been no mention of disability. Participant D reflected that "other more mainstream topics within inclusivity and diversity" were classroom conversations instead (personal communication, February 1, 2023). Participant H indicated that the university was not equipped to handle students with disabilities, primarily mental and psychological disabilities. They have been "made to feel very uncomfortable by people's ableist mindsets" (Participant H, communication, February 3, 2023). Additionally, Participant H observed that at this university, "you're allowed to have anxiety or light depression, but you're not allowed to have a real mental health issue" (personal communication, February 3, 2023). This participant explained that because there are no education, platforms, or resources for these types of disabilities, the stigmas have continued in the classroom setting.

Participant A shared that if anyone does think of disability, there is suspicion, pity, and "a sense of like, poor you" (personal communication, January 31, 2023). Additionally, this participant shared that because their disability is congenital, people will assume that their parents or they did something wrong to deserve their disability. Participant A noted that this view of disability had created a sense of saviorship, implying that disabled students are "damaged in some way" (personal communication, January 31, 2023). Participant A also explained that "professors, often, in or outside of

the classroom, are not equipped to have conversations about it, to even talk about it" (personal communication, January 31, 2023). Instead of engaging in conversation, Participant A explained that professors usually ask for a letter from the Learning Center. The Learning Center shared that "they need a letter for everything" (personal communication, January 31, 2023), creating a sense of a total absence of disability as diversity. Instead, Participant A reflected that the mindset is "oh, you're crippled, so go through this service" (personal communication, January 31, 2023).

Question Six: Representation

The sixth question was, "In the classroom, what are your experiences with professors giving you the ability to represent yourself?" Of the 10 participants, nine felt they could represent themselves in the classroom, although there were varying degrees of comfortability within the nine responses. Participant F expressed that their professors encouraged them to "get personal but only to the extent that you want to, only if you feel comfortable talking about it" in their papers, which the participant felt helped them process their journey with their disability (personal communication, February 2, 2023). Participant I also shared that their professors confirmed with them before class if they would feel comfortable if called on to answer questions and verbally participate, which helped the participant feel more in control in choosing when to represent themselves in class.

Participant D shared that they tended to be "quieter and not let that side of myself or as much of myself out in the classroom for various reasons" (personal communication, February 1, 2023). However, they felt their professors "are good at letting students be themselves and have their opinions and share of themselves"

(Participant D, personal communication, February 1, 2023). Participant G also shared that they are “very shy about their disability and try to keep it on the down low” (personal communication, February 3, 2023). However, when their professors noticed their disability, Participant G explained that they would say something like, “Hey, it’s okay. Do the best you can, but also just know it’s okay that you’re like this. It is okay; you have this” (personal communication, February 3, 2023). Participant G explained they have more “courage to accept that part of myself that I’ve never really accepted before” (personal communication, February 3, 2023).

Participant C explained that their professors have let them stand in class or put one leg on a chair to make them more physically comfortable. Additionally, Participant C has often researched disability within the context of course content, allowing them to represent their experiences academically. Participant B also felt encouraged to share their experiences and tell their story. Their program mentor has told them, “You know, you could just write about disability” (personal communication, January 31, 2023) in papers and various projects in the classroom.

Participant H shared that they have never felt pressured to share anything with the class and that professors “haven’t pointed me out as an example because it’s confidential” (personal communication, February 3, 2023). Participant H also explained that “people in my position don’t tell their professors what the disability is because it’s immediately stigmatized” (personal communication, February 3, 2023). Participant H reflected:

> I feel like if I wanted to share, I would be able to have a platform, but I don’t trust people [here] with that necessarily. It’s a balance of wanting to be open but not really feeling like I should be. I feel like if I’m open and it goes wrong, that would

> be my fault because I'm aware of the cultural climate here. (personal communication, February 3, 2023)

Participant J felt they could represent themselves in the classroom but reflected that they had "an interesting relationship with the concept of representing myself because I've had to do that a lot" (personal communication, February 8, 2023). Participant J explained:

> Sometimes it's exhausting [having] to constantly advocate for yourself … there are times where I wish I could wave a magic wand and have everything be okay or have them understand immediately. I always have to send that email explaining how my mind works, why, and what the problems are, which is a little bit tiring. (personal communication, February 8, 2023)

The Final Question

The final interview question was, "What classroom experiences have not been covered in the questions I asked you? Participant A shared that they believe there should be more work done to make accessibility an imperative in the way the class functions. In other words, they wanted to see disability within "the infrastructure of how we think about curriculum" (Participant A, personal communication, January 31, 2023). Participant A believed that disability should be more incorporated within pedagogy as awareness and not just as a legal requirement, as with the Americans with Disability Act standards and protocols. Participant C reflected that they regularly experienced the tension between vulnerability and being viewed as capable, "I want them to know how I'm doing because I want to be known and I want to get accommodations, but sometimes it's really hard to get that, but still be able to be seen as I can still do work" (personal communication, February 1, 2023).

Also sharing the paradox of disability, Participant D explained that they feel like in the classroom, "professors will expect a particular transparency of us … but [they] might

not have already created that space for us to be transparent with them. There's a give and take to it" (personal communication, February 1, 2023). Participant D also reflected that they "have had a professor who'd be super transparent with me of their own experiences and feelings, but still, it can be hard to expect that from a student, but that just has to be a part of it sometimes" (personal communication, February 1, 2023). Participant E shared that they sometimes feel "a bit stressed out and a bit lonely" (personal communication, February 2, 2023) when their professor asks for a volunteer note-taker in class, and the participant knows the accommodation is for them. The participant knew "my professor was trying to have someone help, so I'm sometimes just being tugged in between two of them" (personal communication, February 2, 2023). Participant F also shared similar ideas surrounding in-class dynamics, such as the misperceptions of disability. Participant F explained that "not all disabilities are visible, and a lot of people, I think, struggle with that. If they can't see it, they're like, 'oh, [they] aren't struggling with anything'" (personal communication, February 2, 2023).

Themes and Patterns of the Study

By extrapolating the participants' responses within the NVivo qualitative data software, themes emerged from the study's interview questions, creating a holistic map of predominant factors for the study. Table 1 shows these factors as (a) professor's years of experience, (b) advocating, (c) a cyclical process, (d) professor awareness, (e) visual perception, (f) disability misrepresented, (g) intentionality, and (h) area of study.

Table 1

NVivo Nodes Emerging into Themes

Name	Files	References
Professor's years of experience	1	2
Advocating	1	3
A cyclical process	4	5
Professor awareness	2	6
Visual perception	6	10
Disability misrepresented	2	12
Intentionality	4	15
Area of study	5	18

As shown in Table 2, the interview responses contained 17 direct references to positive sentiments and 35 direct references to negative sentiments. Figures 1 and 2, respectively, show corresponding word clouds exhibiting the keywords and phrases from the sentiment extrapolation.

Table 2

NVivo Sentiment Table

Name	Files	References
Positive	6	17
Negative	8	35

Figure 1

NVivo Positive Sentiment Word Cloud

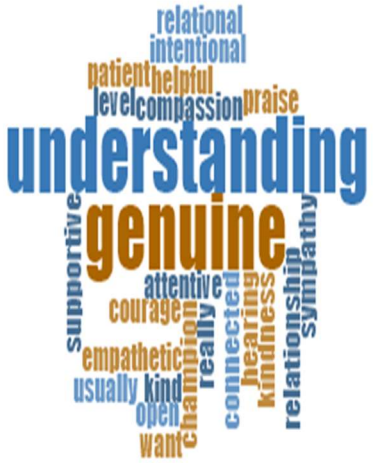

Figure 2

NVivo Negative Sentiment Word Cloud

The positive word cloud image highlighted *understanding* and *genuineness* as the predominant words used throughout the study. Conversely, in the second-word

cloud image, the terms *suspicion, do not understand*, and *uncomfortable* were the study's most negatively used words and phrases. Table 3 and Table 4 represent the complete breakdown of the positive and negative sentiments reflected, word for word, from the transcribed interview data.

Table 3

NVivo Positive Sentiment Complete Breakdown

Positive Sentiment
Usually, some level of compassion and sympathy
Understanding and patience
Understanding
Helpful and supportive
Connected
Open
Relational kindness
Genuine
Relationship
Genuine
They want to champion me
Intentional
Praise it
Attentive
Been kind in hearing me out
Courage
Empathetic

Table 4

NVivo Negative Sentiment Complete Breakdown

Negative Sentiment
Having to adapt and learn more about myself
Struggle
Tough
Fear
Struggled
Sense of suspicion

Awkward
Suspicion towards my disability
Uncomfortable
Callous
Do not quite understand
Overwhelmed
Suspicion
Stigma
Uncomfortable
Resistance
Stereotypes
You don’t understand
There are so many stigmas
Shy about my disability
Stigmatized
Exhausting to advocate for yourself constantly
Tiring
Trying to put a Band-Aid on me
Stubborn
Intimidating
Defensive
I am going to have to be overly transparent
They are also disappointed
Stressed out
Lonely
Miscommunicated
Rather flippant
Downright rude
Frustrating experience

These sentiment responses represent the emotional component of the narrative interview experience and share the more personal journey the participants go through when navigating their disability in the classroom environment. There are just over twice as many negative sentiments as positive ones. The data suggest that the study participants experienced more negative feelings, emotions, and situations than positive ones.

Conclusions Concerning the Findings of the Present Case Study

Undergraduate disabled students experience marginalization within the domains and perspectives of CDS, and AL can help.

Walumbwa et al. (2008) highlight that the tenets of AL are more complex than authentically accurate or genuine to oneself. Researchers suggest that more accountability and less tolerance of leader inconsistency within espoused principles, behavior, and virtues provide the narrative and the need for AL (Walumbwa et al., 2008). As a result, the intersectionality of positive organizational behavior, high-level leadership, and ethics, combined with philosophical and psychological perspectives, creates the framework for AL theory (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Avolio and Mhatre (2012) posited that the AL process included the maturity of positive psychological capital within multiple dimensions, including leader-self awareness and regulation, follower development, and efficacy. Authentic leaders tend to be highly aware of others' observations of their values and actions and the integration of those qualities with the qualities of those around them (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) which aligns with the CDS methodology that disability bridges theoretical concerns and practical applications within a predominant psychological, cultural, and social activism paradigm (Goodley, 2013; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017). When the bridge is lacking, as with this study, disabled students do not feel seen, heard, understood, accepted, or important, per the perspectives within the CDS domains (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017).

The case study's findings connect the AL tenants of leader self-awareness, positive psychological capacity, consistency, and positive organizational behavior to the participants' experiences and observations in the classroom. The findings of the

previous research and this case study have direct links and connections. The case study findings aligned with the research and perspectives of CDS, that while resources and accommodations exist for students with disabilities at the case study university, professors lack understanding, awareness, and ability to integrate a fluid pedagogical culture into the classroom environment. Most participants expressed that disability is not considered a type of diversity in the classroom setting, and there are stigmas and stereotypes of disability that isolate the students from that community, connecting with Barclay et al. (2012), who posited that stigma centered on persons with disabilities results in the marginalization of that community. The case study's participants also expressed tension and difficulty in balancing capability and independence with requesting the help needed to succeed with the course content.

There are direct correlations between whether professors exhibit AL and relational transparency capability in the classroom and the participants' ability to succeed academically and socially in the classroom setting within the perspectives of CDS tenants of belonging and meaning-making (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017). Direct observations, shared from the participants' experiences and responses to the interview questions, developed eight emergent themes. The level and maturity of a professor's AL, relational transparency, and understanding of disability depended on (a) how long the professor had taught, (b) how self-aware they were in the classroom, (c) how keen their awareness was within determining and balancing the visual perception of disabled students in the classroom; (d) how attuned they were to disability within representation, and (e) how the professor's level of intentionality in seeking to know and

help students in the classroom. These findings connect to Linjuan and Stacks (2014), who contended that AL informs transparent communication systems.

The participants also recognized that professors in their major courses exhibited more AL, relational transparency, disability acumen, and compassion than professors in their general education or elective courses. Observation of professors' behavior and actions in the classroom setting created a cyclical process or feedback loop by which participants would be as transparent and relational as their professors, directly connecting the leader-follower dynamics of AL with the findings from this case study. The data also yields that the degree of maturity within AL and relational transparency affects the professor's ability to understand and be aware of the complexities of disability.

While each of the interview responses yielded some positive experiences, a majority of participants described negative interactions with their professors in the classroom within the context of (a) their overall academic experience, (b) their ability to get to know their professors socially, (c) their experiences with their professors using inclusive language in the classroom, (d) their professors including disability as diversity, (e) their professors giving them the ability to represent themselves in class, (f) their professors admitting their mistakes, and (g) their professors sharing their feelings in class. These experiences are heightened under the pejorative lens of CDS.

The Core Conclusion

Whether a leader displays AL and relational transparency is relative in the eyes of the follower. If the followers have specific, qualifying phenomenological experiences, such as a disability, the leader must display a more particular set of leadership

competencies. This case study explored the real-time nature of observed AL from the lens of a *complex* environment, an environment where the followers were a marginalized minority community. The *intra-complexity* needed from the leader to have a heightened self and other awareness, visual perception, humility, transparency, and illuminated perception informs the outward *inter-complexity* within the cyclical process of leader-follower relationship, trust, and operational success. Another core conclusion focuses on CDS and Schalk's (2017) notion that the methodological approach within the multidimensional perspectives of representation, giving voice, and inclusivity within the disability community can be strengthened by implementing AL and relational transparency constructs.

Study Limitations

Limitations within this case study include selecting participants from a small population size. Of 196 students invited to participate in the case study, only 12 expressed interest. In total, 10 students participated in the case study, meeting the minimum expectation of 10, which did meet the satisfactory amount of theoretical data saturation (Guest et al., 2006, p. 60); however, the case study may have benefitted from additional participants from varying institutions and geographical locations, adding to the robust thick data analysis.

Additionally, due to the small population size and the confidential, sensitive nature of the content, all demographic data were omitted from the case study. The case study may have been strengthened by examining socioeconomic and culturally ethnic data, especially in discovering patterns and relationships within participants' phenomenological experiences and studying disability-type specifically. Finally, this

case study might have benefited from a more structured procedural system in obtaining study participants with every type of disability for accurate representation. While the case study did have a broad spectrum of disabilities represented, a more formal siphoning process might be prudent rather than the luck that it would occur.

Suggestions for Future Research

The case study findings suggest that effective AL within the perspective of CDS heightens the ability of leaders to lead a complex, diverse minority community. Future research may include a study involving AL and other minorities, such as cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic communities. Future research may identify diversity within the organizational leadership lens, including the disability community. There may be a need to expand the concept of *complex leadership* within real-time scenarios and environments by envisioning a model whereby leaders utilize AL theory, personal authenticity, and organizational development within diverse followership typologies. This leadership model could be the first to center on disability as a form of diversity within the context of leader best practices and follower dynamics through utilizing AL and CDS.

This case study may also provide helpful university training program content for faculty and staff, especially within diversity and inclusion programs. It shows the importance of considering leadership techniques and pedagogy in the classroom within the specific nature of faculty-led behavior. This type of research may also recognize communities such as the disability community as needing to be a prominent force in engaging positive and effective leadership, not just educationally, but within modern society and civilization.

Conclusion

This phenomenological qualitative case study utilized a semi-structured narrative style approach to explore the lived experiences of undergraduate disabled university students in the classroom setting concerning faculty-led AL, relational transparency, and CDS. Themes and patterns emerged consistent with the literature, identifying that faculty who employ AL connect with disabled students, within the domains of CDS, helping them to feel seen and heard. More work and scholarship are needed in this relatively untapped and unknown sphere of both leadership and disability. In other words, it is time to focus professional, academic, and educational pedagogical attention on the largest minority community in the country.

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