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From Stigma to Strength: Understanding Psycho-Emotional Disablism and the Transformative Potential of Learning Disabilities

D'un biais à une force : comprendre la discrimination psychoémotionnelle contre les personnes avec les handicaps et le potentiel transformateur des handicaps d'apprentissage

Emma Peddigrew, PhD
Brock University, Department of Education
epeddigrew@brocku.ca

Abstract

This paper argues for reconceptualizing learning disabilities (LDs) as a natural part of human variation rather than a deficit, advancing the conversation about LDs within Critical Disability Studies (CDS) and the social-relational model (SRM). While much critical scholarship has focused on defining LDs and addressing their structural (e.g., educational barriers, access to resources) and neurological (e.g., cognitive processing differences) factors, less attention has been paid to the psychological impact of disablism. This paper addresses this gap by exploring the concept of psycho-emotional disablism, which highlights how societal attitudes and ableist structures create internalized stigma, anxiety, and emotional challenges for individuals with LDs. However, the most instrumental piece of this research is understanding how disability can be understood as part of what it means to be human. Drawing on positive psychology and the neurodiversity paradigm, this paper argues for the transformative potential of recognizing the strengths and perspectives associated with LDs, including innovation, adaptability, and nonlinear thinking. By situating LDs within a broader framework of diversity, this research aims to challenge deficit-oriented views of disability and advocate for systemic and relational approaches that promote well-being and empowerment.

Résumé

Ce texte argumente en faveur de la reconceptualisation des handicaps d'apprentissage comme une partie naturelle de la variation humaine et non comme une déficience et promeut la conversation sur les handicaps d'apprentissage au cœur des études critiques sur le handicap et du modèle social du handicap. Bien que la majorité de la scolarité critique se soit focalisée à définir les handicaps d'apprentissage et à aborder les facteurs structurels (ex. les barrières éducatives, l'accès aux ressources) et neurologiques (ex. les différences liées au développement cognitif), moins d'attention a été portée vers l'impact psychologique de la discrimination contre les personnes avec des handicaps. Ce texte adresse le vide en explorant le concept de la discrimination psychoémotionnelle contre les personnes avec des handicaps et en soulignant la manière dont les attitudes

sociétales et les structures du validisme créent un biais interne, l'anxiété et des obstacles émotionnels pour des individus avec des handicaps d'apprentissage. Toutefois, la partie la plus essentielle de cette recherche consiste en la compréhension du handicap comme étant une expérience humaine. En tirant sur la psychologie positive et le paradigme de la neurodiversité, ce texte argumente en faveur du potentiel transformateur lié à la reconnaissance des forces et des perspectives associées avec les handicaps d'apprentissage, ce qui inclut l'innovation, l'adaptabilité et la pensée non linéaire. En situant les handicaps d'apprentissage à l'intérieur du cadre vaste de la diversité, cette recherche vise à défier une perspective centrée sur la déficience et à plaider pour des approches systématiques et relationnelles qui promeuvent le bien-être et l'autonomisation.

Keywords
Learning disabilities, psycho-emotional disability, critical disability studies, social-relational, strengths-based framework.

Mots clés
Les handicaps d'apprentissage, le handicap psychoémotionnel, les études critiques du handicap, le modèle social, un cadre basé sur les forces

While a substantial body of critical disability scholarship has addressed learning disabilities (LDs) in relation to their definitions, neurological underpinnings, and the effectiveness of policies designed to support individuals with LDs (Paulesu et al., 2014; Penney, 2018; Skues & Cunningham, 2011), the psychological impact of disablism remains underexplored. Discussions with individuals with LDs are gaining importance, helping us understand the complex nature of disability from the perspective of those with lived experience. LDs are often categorized as lifelong neurological dysfunctions that compromise the ability to process, produce, and store information (Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario [LDAO], 2001).[1] Recent research highlights how stigma, stereotype threat, and stress contribute to emotional challenges among individuals with LDs (Haft et al., 2023; Stein et al., 2024), while resilience-based models emphasize the protective role of self-advocacy, supportive relationships, and emotional regulation (Catts & Petscher, 2022; Haft et al., 2016). These findings call for a more socially situated understanding of LDs that recognizes both vulnerability and strength.

The current paper asks: *how can those with LDs combat feelings of psycho-emotional disablism?* First, it explores psycho-emotional disablism through the lenses of Critical Disability Studies (CDS) and the Social-Relational Model (SRM), emphasizing the emotional toll of societal attitudes. Second, it examines how ableism and neoliberal educational norms fuel internalized stigma. Finally, it proposes ways to reconceptualize

[1] In the United Kingdom, the term "learning disabilities" generally refers to intellectual and developmental disabilities. In this paper, I use the North American definition of LDs, which refers to specific learning disabilities that affect the acquisition of academic skills despite typical intelligence and access to instruction.

disability as a natural part of human diversity rather than a deficit, drawing on positive psychology and the neurodiversity paradigm to offer more empowering frameworks.

Critical Disability Studies

Disability studies emerged in the 1970s as an academic and political response to the marginalization of disabled people, gaining traction during the 1981 International Year of Disabled People and the rise of the disability rights movement (Goodley et al., 2019, 2020). In recent years, the field has evolved into what is now known as CDS, which critiques earlier models—especially the binary opposition between medical and social models—and instead understands disability as historically, culturally, and politically constructed (Castrodale, 2017; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2016; Goodley et al., 2019, 2020, 2021; Hall, 2019). CDS interrogates how power shapes norms, institutions, and knowledge systems that marginalize disabled people. It centers questions such as: Who produces knowledge about disability? Whose experiences are privileged or erased? It emphasizes the importance of disabled people's lived experiences as sources of resistance and insight (Castrodale, 2017; Goodley et al., 2020). It also draws attention to how communication, interpretation, and representation can advantage certain groups while disadvantaging others. It foregrounds the lived experiences of disabled individuals as vital sources of insight and resistance. Current CDS scholarship focuses on the relational and affective dimensions of disability, the importance of intersectionality (race, class, gender, sexuality), and the systemic operations of ableism (Goodley et al., 2021). It also draws on posthumanist and decolonial thought to challenge Eurocentric notions of the human. Rather than framing disability as a deficit, CDS positions it as a generative and politicized identity that is integral to human diversity and transformation.

Conceptual Framework: Psycho-Emotional Disablism

Disability is often understood from either the medical model, which locates disability in individual impairment and emphasizes diagnosis and treatment (Briggs & Cameron, 2015), or the social model, which attributes disability to societal barriers that restrict participation (Thomas, 1999). While the social model has been vital in challenging exclusion, it has been critiqued for overlooking the emotional and identity-based impacts of disablism (Reeve, 2004, 2015; Thomas, 1999). To address this, Thomas (1999) proposed the SRM, which integrates both structural and psycho-emotional dimensions of disablism. The SRM defines disablism as “a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional wellbeing” (Thomas, 1999, p. 60). The SRM distinguishes between “barriers to doing” (e.g., inaccessible environments, discriminatory policies) and “barriers to being” (e.g., social exclusion, internalized oppression) (Reeve, 2004; Thomas, 2007).

Structural disablism involves material barriers—such as inaccessible school buildings, inadequate classroom supports, or the absence of assistive technologies—that limit physical participation (Connors & Stalker, 2007; Thomas, 2004). While these barriers have been a primary focus of disability activism, psycho-emotional disablism remains underexplored (Reeve, 2015). Psycho-emotional disablism, which is often less visible, involves the internal effects of social stigma that can profoundly affect self-esteem and identity (Reeve, 2015). As Thomas (1999) explains, this form of disablism includes the

“hurtful, hostile or inappropriate words or behaviours” that negatively impact individuals’ sense of self (Connors & Stalker, 2007, p. 21). Examples include the stares or derogatory comments of strangers, which can harm emotional well-being as much as physical barriers do in excluding individuals from public spaces (Thomas, 2004). For young people in particular, these barriers to being can profoundly shape their sense of identity and belonging (Worth, 2013).

Impairment Effects

The SRM emphasizes that these experiences of disablism are shaped by broader social factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status, as well as personal history and lived interactions with impairment effects (Reeve, 2015). For instance, impairment effects—defined as the bodily or cognitive variations that can influence how individuals navigate their environments—might include fatigue, differences in processing, or reduced mobility (Thomas, 1999). While these effects may be part of some individuals’ lived realities, they are intensified by socially constructed barriers, policies, and ableist assumptions. Rather than framing impairment as something to be "combated," a CDS approach resists deficit-based perspectives and instead foregrounds the relational dynamics between bodies, minds, and environments (Thomas, 2004). As Sang et al. (2022) argue, understanding disability requires a threefold consideration: the direct effects of impairment, the barriers to doing, and the barriers to being. From this perspective, the material realities of impairment—whether physical, sensory, or cognitive—are not denied but are understood in relation to disablism, which manifests through exclusion, stigma, and discriminatory structures (Thomas, 1999). This interdependent relationship emphasizes the need to understand how the interaction

between embodiment and environment contributes to psycho-emotional disablism. In *Madness, Distress and the Politics of Disablement,* Reeve (2015) and Briggs and Cameron (2015) highlight the cumulative impact of disablism on emotional well-being and identity. For individuals living with emotional distress, it can be challenging to disentangle the affective experiences linked to impairment from those arising from disablist interactions and social exclusion. Yet, this complexity underscores the value of psycho-emotional disablism as a lens for exploring how individuals make sense of their lives in contexts shaped by both bodily difference and social inequity (Briggs & Cameron, 2015).

Learning Disabilities

In Canada, definitions of LDs provided by the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC, 2015) and the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO, 2001) have shaped provincial educational policies. LDAC (2015) defines LDs as:

> A number of disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding, or use of verbal or nonverbal information…resulting from impairments in one or more processes related to: language processing; phonological processing; visual spatial processing; processing speed; memory and attention; and executive functions. (paras. 1–2)

Traditional definitions, including those in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), classify LDs (or Specific Learning Disorders) as neurodevelopmental conditions marked by persistent difficulties in reading, writing, or mathematics despite targeted interventions. These definitions tend to focus on individual academic performance and have been critiqued for emphasizing deficits rather than considering social or contextual factors. While such frameworks inform interventions, they tend to overlook the socio-emotional dimensions of LDs, such as stigma, stereotype threat, and emotional well-being. A growing body of research challenges these narrow deficit-based models. Cluley

et al. (2020), drawing on assemblage theory, reconceptualize the “learning-disabled body” as dynamically shaped by biological, social, institutional, and material interactions. This ontological shift moves beyond hyper-psychologized and static understandings, offering a more politically attuned and responsive framework that aligns with this paper’s call for inclusive and socially situated models of LDs.

Similarly, Catts and Petscher (2022) propose a cumulative risk and resilience model of dyslexia, in which vulnerabilities (e.g., phonological difficulties, low SES, adverse childhood experiences) interact with protective factors (e.g., oral language strengths, cognitive flexibility, early intervention) to influence developmental outcomes. Ontario’s Policy and Program Memorandum 8 (PPM-8) represents a step toward this complexity by integrating cognitive, academic, and functional assessments. However, even broadened models often focus on individual impairments while minimizing systemic barriers and psychosocial pressures. Recent research underscores the importance of these factors. Stein et al. (2024) highlight that while students with LDs face elevated stress, many also demonstrate emotional and cognitive resilience when supported by strong relational networks and strengths-based environments. Haft et al.’s (2023) systematic review shows that stigma and stereotype threat are significantly linked to reduced self-esteem and increased anxiety among individuals with LDs, suggesting that emotional harms are not incidental but central to the experience of LDs in normative academic contexts. As Haft et al. (2016) have shown, both cognitive resilience (e.g., executive function, working memory, language-based strengths) and socio-emotional resilience (e.g., growth mindsets, familial support, teacher advocacy) play a protective role for students with

reading disabilities, thus demonstrating the importance of addressing both internal and external factors in LD research and practice.

Psycho-Emotional Dimensions of Learning Disabilities

Although the social model of disability addresses structural barriers—such as inaccessible environments or inadequate accommodations—it tends to marginalize emotional experiences. The SRM builds on the social model by explicitly highlighting how ableist attitudes and institutional norms generate emotional harm, in addition to physical or material barriers (Thomas, 1999; Reeve, 2004). For individuals with LDs, whose cognitive profiles diverge from dominant norms, schools often become sites of exclusion, particularly when “intelligence” is narrowly defined through standardized testing (Deacon et al., 2022; Goodley, 2019). In these contexts, students may internalize their difficulties as personal failures rather than the result of mismatched learning environments (Haft et al., 2023). The concept of psycho-emotional disablism (Reeve, 2012) captures how social injustice extends into emotional life, especially when compounded by other oppressions such as racism or sexism. As Thomas (2004) writes:

> It is about being made to feel of lesser value, worthless, unattractive, or disgusting, as well as it is about 'outside' matters such as being turned down for a job because one is 'disabled’ or not being offered the chance of a mainstream education because of 'special needs.'" (Thomas, 2004, pp. 9-10)

This duality—of external and internal harm—is particularly salient for people with LDs, who navigate both inaccessible curricula and widespread devaluation of neurodivergent learning. These experiences often give rise to shame, isolation, and self-doubt—emotional responses that profoundly shape identity and aspirations (Worth, 2013). Still, these responses are not universal. As Reeve (2004) notes, they are mediated by social context, support systems, and intersecting identities. Research on resilience and positive

disability identity (Haft et al., 2016; Stein et al., 2024) shows that inclusive environments can support affirming self-concepts and a revaluation of alternative ways of knowing. This paper, grounded in CDS, positions LDs not as deficits to be overcome, but as expressions of natural human variation (Goodley et al., 2019).

The Body

Disability studies have long emphasized how bodies are socially constructed, rejecting simplistic separations between the biological and social. For people with LDs, the body becomes a site of contestation—not due to visible difference, but because of the erasure of their needs and experiences in education and public discourse (McGuire, 2010). The invisibility of LDs invites skepticism and misunderstanding, often resulting in accusations of laziness or incompetence. Shildrick (2009) challenges normative assumptions about embodiment, emphasizing that non-normative bodies and minds disrupt cultural expectations. Applying this perspective to LDs reframes cognitive difference not as a deficiency, but as a potential—generating insights, new practices, and innovation. However, celebrating distinctive strengths should not obscure the need for access and support. Viewing disability through the lens of performativity and fluid embodiment makes it possible to imagine responses that go beyond remediation—responses that affirm difference and challenge internalized stigma (Goodley et al., 2019). In this sense, bodily difference becomes not a limit, but a natural part of human variation (Goodley et al., 2021).

Direct and Internalized Oppression

The SRM offers a valuable lens for examining how external and internal forces of oppression are deeply intertwined (Reeve, 2004). The ‘out there,’ or public social forces,

cannot be discussed in isolation from the 'in here,' or more private, personal forces of disability oppression (Hernandez-Saca & Cannon, 2018). Grenier et al. (2022) describe direct psycho-emotional disablism as arising from social interactions that damage self-worth, such as dismissive words, exclusionary practices, or patronizing attitudes. These microaggressions, alongside broader systemic barriers, shape self-perception and reinforce the notion that disability is inherently negative or shameful. Individuals with LDs, in particular, may face chronic invalidation—being told they are not "really" disabled or that their accommodations are unfair advantages. Such experiences can lead individuals to reject necessary supports, fearing accusations of laziness or dishonesty. This is a manifestation of internalized oppression, a key feature of psycho-emotional disablism, in which individuals begin to question their legitimacy, worth, or potential (Thomas, 2007). Indirect disablism refers to emotional harm caused by structural exclusion, such as repeated denial of accommodations (Reeve, 2014). Though less visible, these harms are no less profound. Charlton (2004) describes their cumulative effect as the "emasculation of the self" (p. 69). The SRM helps us understand how such exclusions reflect broader social hierarchies that define whose bodies and minds are considered normal or valuable.

Ableism, Normalcy, and Neoliberalism

CDS reveals how disability is shaped not just by barriers but by cultural constructions of normalcy. Ableism privileges a narrow, normative ideal—able-bodied, neurotypical, white, male, productive—and marginalizes all departures from that standard (Hall, 2019). These standards shape access to education, employment, social belonging, and self-understanding. Within this frame, LDs are not just medicalized; they are devalued within a neoliberal culture that prioritizes productivity, independence, and self-discipline

(Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2016). This narrow, standardized definition of success stigmatizes those who process information differently, struggle with conventional tasks, or require interdependent forms of support. Students with LDs are judged by their failure to meet standardized norms and timelines, rather than being supported in navigating alternate ways of learning and knowing. Goodley (2019) argues for dismantling the binary of "ability/disability" altogether and instead recognizing the interdependence of all humans. Rather than framing disability as a "problem to be solved," CDS asks how disabled experiences might redefine what it means to live a full, meaningful, and valuable life. By challenging the narrow, productivity-oriented norms that devalue those who learn differently, it also rejects eugenic logics—ideologies that historically sought to eliminate disability through social or biological control—and instead affirms disability as intrinsic to human diversity (Shildrick, 2009).

Reconceptualizing Disability: From Deficit to Natural Human Variation

Reframing disability as an integral and natural part of human diversity is crucial for dismantling deficit-based paradigms that have long pathologized difference. As Garland-Thomson (2012) notes, disability generates meaning, identity, and insight—not in spite of, but through its difference. Disability as a concept resists the urge to be pathologized or idealized and instead holds space for its inherent complexity. This reframing aligns with the neurodiversity paradigm, which views cognitive differences, such as dyslexia, as expected variation rather than deviation (Walker, 2013). Within this CDS framing, disability is not a problem to be solved or an asset to be leveraged, but a form of embodiment that deepens our understanding of knowledge, community, and ethics (Singer, 1999; Walker, 2013). Garland-Thomson (2012) articulates three ways in which

disability operates as a generative force: as a narrative resource, providing stories that question dominant norms of success and ability; as an epistemic resource, offering alternative ways of knowing, solving problems, and innovating; and as an ethical resource, inviting societies to embrace interdependence and collective care.

Dyslexia and Natural Cognitive Difference

Thomas G. West's (2022) work on dyslexia exemplifies this shift away from deficit logic, highlighting distinctive cognitive profiles as naturally occurring strengths rather than compensations for deficits. "I was less interested in 'fixing' the problems," he writes, "rather, I was much more interested in understanding the areas of distinctive strength and talent" (p. 196). This reframing moves beyond deficit and the "supercrip" narrative (Schalk, 2016) and instead emphasizes how dyslexic individuals' visual-spatial and pattern-recognition strengths offer meaningful contributions to modern innovation, design, and creativity. Research supports this, indicating that many individuals with LDs demonstrate heightened visual-spatial reasoning and creative problem-solving abilities shaped by their cognitive differences rather than occurring despite them (Fletcher & Grigorenko, 2017; McNamara, 2020). These variations exemplify natural human diversity, reinforcing disability as a valuable mode of being rather than a deficit to be normalized.

Bridging Disability Studies and Psychology: A New Paradigm

Psychology has historically framed disability through paradigms of diagnosis, treatment, and normalization, reinforcing individualizing and pathologizing discourses that have contributed to marginalization and disempowerment (Goodley et al., 2019). This has led to justified skepticism from disability studies scholars who prioritize political, social, and cultural frameworks over deficit-based views. However, dismissing psychology

entirely risks overlooking its potential to support more inclusive understandings of disability. Goodley (2019) argues that bridging psychology and disability studies can illuminate neglected emotional and relational dimensions—such as the psychological toll of living in a disabling society and the unconscious biases non-disabled people hold toward difference. Just as critical scholars have critiqued the field of LD for neglecting sociocultural contexts (Goodley, 2019), knowledge of the socioemotional dimensions of LD remains limited, underscoring the need for a psycho-emotional disablism perspective (Lynda & Princess, 2021).

One primary concern for both disability scholars and critical psychologists is the psychological impact of living with an impairment (such as LDs) in a disabling society. As Reeve (2012) notes:

> Although early disability writers such as Paul Hunt (1966) documented the impact of stigma and internalized oppression on the psyche of disabled people, these problems have largely remained…It was the naming of these personal experiences as psycho-emotional disablism which has allowed for a sociological analysis. (p. 78)

According to Thomas (2012), the psychological component of disability constitutes a non-material form of disablism. These non-tangible experiences must be acknowledged alongside physical barriers at both collective and individual levels (Jarrett et al., 2014). A more holistic paradigm would unite structural (barriers to doing) and psycho-emotional (barriers to being) dimensions within the extended social model. Over time, these experiences can contribute to internalized oppression or what Marxist theorists call false consciousness, in which individuals come to believe they are inherently inferior (Lynda & Princess, 2021). What is needed, therefore, is a psychology of disability grounded in social relations rather than cure or adjustment (Reeve, 2004)—a reimagined framework

that sees disability not as a deviation from development but as a meaningful form of human diversity.

Positive Psychology and Psycho-Emotional Disablism

Positive psychology, which emphasizes strengths and capacities rather than deficits, offers a promising avenue to address psycho-emotional disablism. By shifting focus from stigma to potential, it promotes greater acceptance of disability as a valued aspect of human diversity among families, educators, and broader society (Breen & Buckley, 2016). This reframing is especially important for individuals with LDs, who often face emotional harm from being labelled as “lazy” or “incapable” (Reeve, 2004). Recent research reinforces the value of a strengths-based, relational approach. Stein et al. (2024) found that children with specific learning disabilities (SLDs) exhibit improved emotional outcomes when supported by affirming relationships and environments that recognize their strengths. Similarly, Haft et al. (2023) show that stigma and stereotype threat significantly undermine self-concept, highlighting the importance of environments that foster belonging and psychological safety. Catts and Petscher’s (2022) cumulative risk and resilience model identifies several protective factors—family support, peer acceptance, and inclusive education—as key buffers that mitigate adverse outcomes. Haft et al. (2016) further argue that socio-emotional resilience is central to how children with reading disabilities navigate adversity and thrive.

Early interventions that integrate academic and emotional support have been shown to enhance well-being significantly (Maw et al., 2024). Approaches that highlight distinctive cognitive assets—such as spatial reasoning or non-linear problem-solving—can build self-esteem and affirm identity (McNamara, 2020). These strategies directly

challenge psycho-emotional disablism by dismantling deficit narratives and promoting empowerment (Thomas, 1999). To reduce stigma and promote understanding, parents, educators, clinicians, and researchers need to recognize the relational nature of psycho-emotional disablism. This involves fostering environments grounded in acceptance, empathy, and strength-based support. Positive psychology offers a critical framework for this transformation, centring well-being and resilience (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). It reframes disability as a potential asset and calls for inclusive structures that empower individuals.

In educational contexts, adopting positive psychology aligns well with the SRM, which emphasizes addressing both structural and psycho-emotional barriers. Educators who adopt this perspective are more likely to create environments in which students with LDs see their disabilities as opportunities for growth rather than limitations. This perspective complements the SRM's focus on transforming disabling attitudes and institutional practices (Reeve, 2004). However, tensions remain in balancing the emphasis on individual strengths with attention to systemic inequities. Positive psychology's emphasis on individual strengths can inadvertently reinforce neoliberal ideals of self-reliance, obscuring systemic and structural causes of disablism (Dirth & Branscombe, 2018). To resist this, traits such as resilience and self-advocacy must be understood as socially embedded, emerging from relationships, community, and collective support. Weitzner et al. (2011) offer a helpful framework by identifying three ways disability can enrich lives: at the individual level (personal growth), the peer level (supporting others), and the community level (advocacy and public education). These

ideas resonate with neurodiversity perspectives, which reject deficit-based views and position disability as a valuable form of human variation.

Making Space for Neurodiversity

The neurodiversity paradigm reframes neurological differences as natural human variation rather than deficits. Coined by Judy Singer (1999), the term “neurodiversity” challenges deficit-based medical models and calls for cultural shifts that actively value, rather than merely tolerate, cognitive difference (Le, 2024). Despite growing awareness, perceptions of neurodivergence remain largely negative, contributing to stigma, poor mental health, and internalized disablism (Araujo et al., 2023; Chapman, 2020; Haft et al., 2023). These social attitudes carry profound psycho-emotional consequences, negatively shaping self-worth and identity (Lynda & Princess, 2021). Le (2024) and Walker (2013) argue that affirming neurodivergent identities can foster self-acceptance and well-being. The neurodiversity movement emphasizes not just inclusion, but transformation—challenging systems that marginalize difference and calling for recognition of neurodivergent knowledge as valuable in its own right. “Neurodivergent knowledge is knowledge,” writes Le (2024, p. 10), insisting that accessibility efforts must be led by those most affected, particularly individuals at the intersections of race, gender, and class.

Though emerging after the development of CDS, the neurodiversity paradigm shares CDS’s critique of normalcy and its emphasis on the social construction of disability. Both reject the notion of a singular or “correct” way to think or learn, instead framing disability as relational and context-dependent (Walker, 2013). Neurodiversity moves beyond the binary of medical versus social models, offering an integrated perspective that

acknowledges biological variation while emphasizing that traits become disabling in particular social and environmental contexts (Kapp, 2020; Singer, 1999). From this standpoint, neurodivergence is not inherently limiting—it may even be adaptive in the right setting. This supports strengths-based approaches grounded in lived experience, which view neurodivergent traits as potential sources of insight and innovation. As Armstrong (2010) and Le (2024) suggest, rethinking intelligence and productivity through this lens challenges dominant cultural narratives and promotes more inclusive definitions of success. Rather than accommodating systems that pathologize difference, the neurodiversity paradigm demands their transformation. It recognizes disability as an essential part of the human continuum and as a valuable way of knowing and being. This study draws on that vision, aligning with CDS's call to "start with the disability but never end with it" (Goodley et al., 2019) and centring neurodivergent voices as essential to reimagining more inclusive futures.

Concluding Thoughts

Conceptualizing psycho-emotional disablism and its effects on individuals with LDs leads to several important conclusions. First, it illustrates how societal attitudes and structural barriers can foster internalized stigma, resulting in feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and anxiety (Reeve, 2015). This internalized disablism compounds the challenges faced by individuals with LDs, as negative societal perceptions become entangled with self-concept. Second, psycho-emotional disablism underscores the importance of fostering environments that counter these harmful narratives by emphasizing strengths, resilience, and the inherent value of diversity. Such environments help individuals reframe their disabilities as integral aspects of identity and as sources of

unique insight and ability (Thomas, 1999). Insights from both psychology and neurodiversity help shift the framing of LDs from deficit and limitation toward meaningful expressions of human diversity. Finally, recognizing psycho-emotional disablism points to the need for systemic transformation. Addressing relational and societal factors that perpetuate disablism requires reshaping educational and social institutions to promote equity and inclusion. This includes not only individualized supports but also a shift in broader cultural narratives around disability to foster acceptance, dignity, and empowerment.

Limitations

Although psycho-emotional disablism is increasingly acknowledged within disability studies, further research is necessary to deepen our understanding of how it manifests across diverse impairments, including learning disabilities. Notable gaps remain regarding the long-term psychological consequences of internalized stigma and the complex role structural inequities play in sustaining disablism. Furthermore, greater attention to intersectional dimensions—such as race, gender, age, and socioeconomic status—is needed to advance future research in this area. Importantly, this paper is based on scholarly literature and does not include direct input from individuals with lived experience of LDs. This limitation restricts the depth and authenticity of the analysis. Future work should prioritize participatory, co-authored, or interview-based methods that amplify the voices of those with LDs to enhance understanding and relevance.

Recommendations

This paper raises a crucial question: *how can we challenge and reduce psycho-emotional disablism?* One way forward is through the integration of positive psychology

(Maw et al., 2024; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014), which promotes a person-centred and strengths-based view of neurodiversity. Positive psychology can serve as a conceptual bridge between psychology and disability studies, reframing neurodevelopmental differences as assets rather than deficits. By identifying and nurturing individual strengths, positive psychology fosters empowerment and self-esteem and promotes a shift away from deficit-based narratives. When applied in educational and workplace contexts, it encourages the creation of environments that affirm neurodiversity and support individuals with LDs. Recognizing the distinct cognitive profiles of individuals with LDs opens the door to alternative ways of thinking and problem-solving, allowing creativity and unconventional approaches to flourish. This shift benefits not only individuals with LDs but society as a whole by challenging narrow definitions of intelligence and success. Embracing positive psychology principles encourages systemic transformation toward greater inclusivity. Future research should continue to explore and evaluate strengths-based approaches to ensure that evolving narratives around disability reflect empowerment, complexity, and human potential.

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