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**SEALE , JANE (2017) FROM THE VOICE OF A 'SOCRATIC GADFLY': A CALL FOR MORE ACADEMIC ACTIVISM IN THE RESEARCHING OF DISABILITY IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION.**

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## **FROM THE VOICE OF A 'SOCRATIC GADFLY': A CALL FOR MORE ACADEMIC ACTIVISM IN THE RESEARCHING OF DISABILITY IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION**

### **ABSTRACT**

In this article I use the lens of voices and silences to frame my review of research in the field of disability and postsecondary education. I argue that we need to view research in this field as a necessarily political act that seeks to turn voices of silence into voices of change. Researchers therefore need to re-think their role in order to understand how they can use and direct their political voices. In order to persuade researchers to heed my call for more academic activism I draw on the arguments of Allan (2010) and adopt the role of a 'socratic gadfly' to identify six political areas of research where I argue that voices and silences need more critical examination. In discussing these six areas I hope to illuminate the implications for 'genuinely investigative' research in the future.

Keywords: disability, postsecondary education, academic activism, voices, silences

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to critically review research relating to disabled students in postsecondary education (PSE) in order to examine what we know and don't know and to highlight implications for future research in the field. For the purposes of this article the term postsecondary education is used very broadly to mean education which is normally delivered by a university or college. More specifically, the focus is on the learning experiences of disabled students registered for undergraduate or postgraduate degree programs. **In using the term 'disabled student' I am aware that there are differences of opinion regarding which term or label is the most appropriate to use. My justification for using this term in preference to others such 'students with disabilities' is that the term 'people with disabilities' implies that the person's impairment or condition causes them to be 'disabled' (and consequently that it is their responsibility to overcome it), whereas 'disabled person' implies that the person is disabled not necessarily by their condition or impairment, but by society and its inability or reluctance to cater effectively for that person (and consequently that society must effect change to remove that disability). (Phipps, Sutherland and Seale 2002, iii). I acknowledge that not everyone in the field will agree with me and will return to the tensions around labelling later in this article.**

To provide a comprehensive review of all possible literature in the field would be difficult and so I propose to place a boundary on my review by using one specific lens: that of voices and silences. Drawing on Freire's (1972) concept of 'cultures of silence' it is my contention that we need to give voice in a more expansive way than has currently been achieved. For Freire, breaking the culture of silence within education was about giving voice to the marginalised (students) and seeking a means whereby the dominant (teachers) could critically respond to the culture (e.g. of discrimination and prejudice). Where Freire offered critical pedagogy as a tool to break the silence within teaching; in this article I will offer academic activism as a tool to break the silences within the field of disability and PSE. Drawing on the arguments of Barton (2001), I position this academic activism as a political act that creates space for fundamental questions to be explored regarding whether disabled students are valued in PSE and viewed as having the same rights as non-disabled students. This political act is inspired by a desire to transform the oppressive environments in which disabled students find themselves.

### **Giving voice to disabled students as a political act: navigating the silences**

The use of voice as a lens with which to examine disability in PSE is not new. There is a relatively long and strong tradition of research in this field using a range of qualitative methods in order to 'give voice' to or 'amplify' the voice of disabled students and find out more about their experiences of PSE (Hall and Tinklin 1998; Fuller, Bradley and Healey 2004; Vickerman and Blundell 2010; Brandt 2011). The main justifications for giving voice to disabled students are that their voices are hidden or lost (Lopez-Gavira and Morina 2015) within research and because the power structures within PSE silence the voices of disabled students and deny their experiences of inequalities (Luna 2009; Beauchamp-Pryor 2012). The purpose of giving voice to disabled students in research is therefore to:

- Illuminate the barriers facing disabled students and the impact they have: Denhart 2008; Hopkins 2011; Redpath et al. 2013; Stein 2013; Lopez-Gavira and Morina 2015
- Identify appropriate and helpful ways of reducing such barriers and inform pedagogical practices: Webster 2004; Quinlan, Bates and Angell 2012; Redpath et al. 2013; Kubiak 2015; Lourens and Swartz 2016).

The commitment is therefore to present alternative ways of doing things; 'voices of silence' become 'voices of change' (Hutcheon and Wolbring 2012). A key consequence of the proposed move to give space to 'voices of change' is that researchers will need to re-think their role in order to understand how they can use and direct their own political voices.

### **Research as a political act: directing the focus of our political voices**

In order to outline the role I believe that researchers need to adopt in order to focus their political voice I will draw on the work of Allan (2010) who argued that the foregrounding of the responsibility to 'the Other' (the marginalised) makes the academic's role explicitly a political one; with a number of specific duties. The first duty for the academic involves the articulation of new political subjectivities, by privileging the voices of minorities and marginalised groups. The second duty, according to Allan is to open up to 'the Other' and be ready to respond to what is forthcoming. Allan (2010) argues that the third duty is to design and undertake research that is genuinely investigative. Allan argues that this requires approaching the research without ready solutions or tricks of the trade. The fourth duty is to 'show oneself' through writing and act as a 'Socratic gadfly' provoking and persuading readers to 'see something other than their own view of the world'. In this article I intend to adopt the role of a 'socratic gadfly' by identifying six key 'political' areas where I will argue voices and silences need critical examination. In doing so, I hope to illuminate the implications for 'genuinely investigative' research in the future.

### **PRIVILEGING THE VOICES OF MINORITIES AND MARGINALISED GROUPS**

It is my contention that one of the main reasons that researchers like myself need to adopt a political voice and act like 'socratic gadflies' is the significant evidence that exists regarding the marginalisation of significant stakeholders. The most obvious marginalised group is disabled students; but in this section I will also argue that the voices of disabled faculty as well as disability support staff have also been marginalised in both practice and research.

#### **The need to privilege the voices of disabled students**

There is evidence to suggest that disabled students experience a lack of understanding and acceptance of their needs from both students (Quick, Lehman and Deniston 2003; Kowalsky and Fresko 2002) and academic and support staff (Ryan 2007; Denhart 2008). This lack of understanding can manifest itself in failure to provide accommodations in teaching (Bishop and Rhind 2011; Claiborne et al. 2011) and in assessments (Hammer, Worth and Dunn 2009; Vickerman and Blundell 2010). Furthermore, such lack of understanding is attributed to negative attitudes towards disability and has been documented in a range of academic spaces including placements and vocational training (Cunnah 2015; Clouder et al. 2016). The experience of negative attitudes and lack of understanding can lead disabled students to feel stigmatised (Stein 2013; Nolan et al. 2015) which can lead them to monitor how they present themselves publically and to be reluctant to speak in public spaces such as seminars or placements (Cameron 2016).

A major area where stigmatisation can silence disabled students voices is in the disclosure of disability in order to obtain the legal right to support and accommodations (Evans 2014; Nolan et al. 2015). For disabled students, disclosure can be viewed as risky because they do not know how faculty will respond (Quinlan et al. 2012); they don't want faculty to think differently of them or misunderstand their difficulties (Baker et al. 2012; Stein 2013); they are concerned that faculty will

not believe they have a real disability (Olney and Brockelman 2003); they don't want to be perceived as not trying hard enough to succeed without support (Hammer et al. 2009); they are afraid that disclosure might impact on their ability to gain employment (Venville, Street and Fossey 2014); they have a desire to forge an identity free of disability (Lightner et al. 2012) or they do not wish information about their private identity to become public property (Borland and James 1999; Claiborne et al. 2011).

It is important to acknowledge that there are other reasons (not necessarily linked to stigma) why disabled students choose not to disclose their disability. For example wanting to be treated like other students (Hall and Tinklin 1998) or training for professions where tensions between professional standards and equality exist (see for example Hargreaves et al. 2014). Furthermore, even in a climate that is 'positive', where no obvious prejudice exists, disabled students may still choose not to disclose (Baker, Boland and Newik 2012). Nevertheless, the literature on disclosure reveals that many disabled students feel unable or reluctant to voice their rights and advocate for their support needs. This has led for a call for more research into how academics and support staff can develop and encourage self-advocacy skills in disabled students (Summers et al. 2014; Stein 2013). Other researchers are more radical, and view self-advocacy as a political rights issue, drawing parallels with gay and black civil rights movements (Anderson 2009; Stodden 2015). The drawing of such parallels bring with them a call for disabled students organisations or 'collectives'. In addition to promoting self-advocacy such collectives are argued to encourage interaction and networking that might serve to counter-act isolation and stigma (Anderson 2009; Argawal, Cavlo and Kumar 2014). Anderson (2009, 1), a blind student, recounts his experiences of an approach towards collectivism called 'The Salon;' at the University of British Columbia (UBC):

UBC does not provide the infrastructure or environment necessary to encourage the interaction and networking of students with disabilities aside from the odd, start of the year mixer. My fellow disabled students have been cast as passive receivers of services, not active agents of change....During the three months of the Salon Series, I have felt like an active agent of dialogue, inquiry, and engagement with a large, unruly and dynamic community that has not often come together on campus in such a powerful and all-inclusive manner.

More research is needed into the kind of student organisations and collectives that are needed in order to promote self-advocacy skills of disabled students. More research is also needed to collect the evidence that such initiatives do actually bring about a change in the nature and frequency of disclosure behaviours.

Promoting disclosure behaviour however, does not challenge the policies and systems in PSE that require disabled students to disclose before their needs will be taken seriously and addressed through accommodation. For some, it is the disclosure system that needs changing, not students behaviour. Therefore, a second priority for research is the need to design, develop and evaluate student voice initiatives specifically aimed at engaging disabled students in policy transformation (Redpath et al. 2013). Student voice in PSE is quite well established (See for example Seale 2010) and has a number of purposes, including encouraging students to participate in governance structures. Very little work has been specifically aimed at disabled students however, suggesting they are invisible and silenced in yet another key sphere of PSE. Beauchamp-Pryor (2012) calls for the identification of barriers that are likely to impede the participation of disabled students in the development of higher education policy and provision within the UK, at both a national and institutional level.

## **The need to privilege the voices of other relevant stakeholders**

Researchers have in many regards been exemplary in giving voice to disabled students academic experiences in recognition of the lack of voice they have in their educational lives and contexts. The same cannot be true for other stakeholders. As Diez, Lopez and Molina (2015, 148) point out: 'only on rare occasion are other members of the HE community given a voice'. Two stake-holder groups I would like to highlight as being particularly deserving of voice amplification are disabled staff and disability support staff.

There is very little research devoted to understanding the experiences of disabled staff (including graduate students). What stories that are told, tell of difficulties in preserving jobs and in having to manage without accommodations (Abram 2003; Damiani and Harbour 2015). There is a real need therefore, for more privileging of the voices of disabled staff, particularly with regards to whether or not they feel able to disclose their disability. It would seem logical that creating inclusive environments for disabled students would involve the need to recognize and support disabled staff. It is argued, for example, that disabled staff can act as important role models: modelling to disabled students how it is possible to succeed in a postsecondary environment and modelling best teaching practices to fellow and future educators (Anderson 2006; Higbee and Mitchel 2009). It is also argued that through their interactions with non-disabled students, disabled staff can raise the students' disability-awareness and open them up to the acceptability of 'otherness' (Michalko 2001) Sheridan and Kotevski (2014, 1170) argue:

Disabled teachers embody pedagogies of justice, interdependence, and respect for differences. Teaching (with) disability reveals spaces in education that often get silenced.

In the US, the Council for Exceptional Children has recently published a policy on disabled educators which acknowledges the benefits that disabled educators can bring to learning and teaching environments but also highlights the challenges they face. It calls for the "provision of strategic supports during recruitment, hiring, practice, and evaluation for educators with disabilities across all educational environments." (CEC, 2016, 1). It would be good to see post-secondary institutions producing similar high profile documents, which do more than pay lip service to their legal obligations in respect to discrimination and equality.

Alongside disabled staff, it is my contention that the voices of disability support staff are missing from research. This might seem an odd claim given that research has sought to document the perceptions of disability support staff regarding the experiences of disabled students (Reed and Curtis 2012] as well their views regarding the knowledge and attitudes of academic staff (Harrison and Holmes 2012). However, there is little research that seeks to document the experiences of disability support staff and the impact that trying to advocate for disabled students and change practices across an institution has on them. This is despite the acknowledgement that they face significant challenges in their work (Hurst 2015). One particular area that I would argue needs further investigation is whether disability support staff are stigmatised by their association with disabled students. Such 'courtesy stigma' has been documented in other fields. For example Broomhead (2016) documented how teachers employed by schools for pupils with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties felt stigmatised and treated as if they were not as clever as other teachers.

## **OPENING OURSELVES UP TO THE OTHER**

Another reason that researchers like myself need to adopt a political voice and act like 'socratic gadflies' is the tension that exist surrounding the construction of disability and difference;

constructions that can prevent an 'opening up to the other' and that can place institutions at odds with their students and researchers at risk of having their research high-jacked by opponents of inclusion.

### **Being sensitive to tensions regarding the construction of disability**

One of the consequences of equality and disability discrimination legislation is that it has produced legal definitions of disability have been 'administratively useful' to PSE institutions and individual tutors in identifying who may need support and accommodations (Jacklin et al. 2007). It is argued however that these legal definitions are based on a medical or deficit model of disability (Berrgren et al. 2016). Furthermore it is claimed that PSE institutions operate a model of compensation in which disabled students have to prove their eligibility for support and accommodations based on the label assigned to their medical diagnosis (Fuller et al. 2009). Not only do disabled students have to submit themselves to a formal diagnosis process, they have to submit themselves to a seeming lottery of whether the institution will accept or contest the diagnosis.

Dyslexia is a particular example where universities and tutors have questioned whether the disability is real or something artificially constructed. In an Irish study examining the experiences of physically disabled and dyslexic students, Hanafin et al. (2007) found that sometimes dyslexia was viewed as a strategy that dyslexic students used to gain unfair advantages. Hanafin et al. (2007) also noted an occasion where a deaf student reported that one of their lecturers would not believe that they were deaf; the student postulated that it may be because the lecturer assumed that deaf people could not talk; a personal construction of disability underpinned by a lack of awareness. Luna (2009) examined how an Ivy League university in the US constructed learning disabilities. Her examination revealed negative stereotypes about students with learning disabilities based on skepticism about the existence of learning disabilities, the competence of students with learning disabilities, the validity of their diagnosis and the fairness of providing accommodations based on this diagnosis.

I would argue that students with other characteristics that are legally protected against discrimination such as age, gender, race, and social-economic status are not subjected to such a contestation of their legal status. It is difficult imagining a faculty member arguing against accommodating a student's learning needs because the student is 'not really' black, or male or socially-deprived. Further sensitivities around how institutions construct disability centre on whether these 'institutional categories are apposite to an understanding of the ways in which students perceive themselves' (Hughes, Corcoran and Slee 2016, 488). While some students accept labels applied to them, others reject them preferring alternative labels (Griffin and Pollack 2009) or refusing to be marked out as a 'special' or different by the label (Madriaga et al. 2011).

The differences in how institutions construct and understand disability compared to disabled students suggest that researchers need to be sensitive to how they construct disability in their own research. Through such sensitivity, researchers can both open themselves up 'to the other' and to the politics underpinning constructions of disability in PCE. Two examples of such opening up that I wish to discuss in more detail are: being aware of the politics being the labelling of student and being sensitive to the politics of 'ableism'.



## *The labelling of disabled students as a political act: navigating the cacophony of voices*

The majority of literature that I have reviewed in preparation for writing this article uses the term 'student with a disability' (see for example Hughes et al. 2016; Lopez-Gavira and Morina 2015; Kubiak 2015; Baker et al. 2012; Diez et al. 2015; Damiani and Harbour 2015; Argawal, et al. 2014; Hurst 2015). The remaining literature uses the term 'disabled student' (see for example: Beauchamp-Pryor 2012; Wray 2012; Riddell and Weedon 2014; Berrgren et al. 2016; Hargreaves et al. 2014; Hutcheon and Wolbring 2012; Redpath et al. 2013; Hopkins 2011; Vickerman and Blundell 2010). **In the introduction I gave my justification for why I felt that referring to 'disabled students' was preferable to referring to 'students with disabilities';** arguing that the term 'people with disabilities' implies that the person's impairment or condition causes them to be 'disabled' (and consequently that it is their responsibility to overcome it), whereas 'disabled person' implies that the person is disabled not necessarily by their condition or impairment, but by society and its inability or reluctance to cater effectively for that person (and consequently that society must effect change to remove that disability). This approach has been adopted by others (Richardson 2010; Brandt 2011) in recognition that is more consistent with a social model of disability; but the practice is not universal; indeed some students have rejected its' use (see Evans 2014 for example). Ryan (2007) acknowledges that definitions in this field are characterised more by disagreement than agreement, but rightly argues that debate is needed in order to combat prejudice and ignorance. Such debate would hopefully open researchers up to the need to openly justify their use of terms, rather than assume that they are not contested.

## *Being sensitive to the politics of 'ableism'*

One of the key areas of prejudice that students experience is linked to assumptions (often unfounded) that disabled students are not as capable as non-disabled students. These assumptions can lead to an overemphasis in research literature on what disabled students cannot do; their deficits and vulnerabilities and what they require from educational institutions in terms of support or accommodation to address such difficulties. The viewing of disabled students through what (Hutcheon and Wolbring 2012) call a 'hegemonic ableism' lens can result in too little attention being paid to disabled students' abilities and capabilities and how barriers can result in disabled students being unable to demonstrate their competences (Claiborne et al. 2011; Griffin and Pollak 2009). This risk became evident to me during my research into the strategies that disabled university students employ in order to use technologies to support their learning (Seale, Draffan and Wald 2010). Analysis of 30 in-depth case studies revealed that the disabled students in our study were very technically competent and confident; something which we chose to call 'digital agility'. This finding provoked me into re-evaluating how I could use this data to influence practice within academia. Rather than focusing on what supports were needed by disabled students in order to enable them to access and use technologies; the data enabled me to focus on how collectively, we as non-disabled students and faculty, could learn from the technology strategies that disabled students adopted. It is for this reason that I endorse the label that Irving (2013, 1042) adopted- that of 'dis/ability':

Here dis/ablement takes on a different hue and adopts a less concrete form. Thus, rather than measure the degree of impairment against a normative white, male, and able-bodied stereotype, and judge it in relation to an individual's productive potential, the dis/abling of students should, in an ideal world, melt away in response to positive social change in which all citizens are valued for who they are, and their human contribution.

In separating out the 'dis' from the 'ability' there is an intention to emphasise both the disabling effect of educational environments and the agency and potential of the student to contribute to that environment and the wider society (Riddell and Weedon 2014). This is attractive to me because it reflects the call made by Connor and Gabel (2013, 100) for 'academic activism that counters the 'master narrative of deficiency'.

### **Being aware how examinations of constructions of difference might reveal new insights**

Many of the discourses surrounding the inclusion of disabled students in PSE invoke powerful concepts such as rights, social justice and equality. The emphasis on equality is particularly interesting because it has in my view resulted in an unhelpful emphasis on sameness and therefore a denial of difference that may not be in the best interests of disabled students. The right to equal opportunities (to access PSE) and equal outcomes (graduation success and employment) is increasingly translated as having to treat all students the same. In treating non-disabled and disabled students the same, each group is viewed as homogenous. It is my contention that this ignores important dimensions of difference and how they might potentially interact.

One example of how dimensions of difference might interact within groups is in data that reveals that students with multiple disabilities can be more disadvantaged than students categorised as having just one disability. For example Richardson (2010) compared attainment in 196,405 students with and without disabilities who were taking courses by distance learning with the Open University in the United Kingdom in 2009. He found that the presence of additional disabilities led to poorer attainment in different respects in students who were blind or partially sighted, students who were deaf or hard of hearing, students with impaired speech, and students with unseen disabilities. Richardson used this data to argue that accommodations to support disabled students in distance education need to be focused on different groups of students with particular disabilities. Guardino and Cannon (2015, 347) have argued that there is a 'dearth of information' on theory, research, and practice related to students who are deaf with additional disabilities such as learning disability, autism, and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

Another example of how dimensions of difference might interact between groups is in data that reveals intersections between disability and other minority categories such as low income, race and speaking English as a second language (Cheatham et al. 2013; Liasidou 2014). Banks (2014) reports that in the US some African American students with disabilities experience difficulty accessing disability support services and appropriate accommodations. Wagner et al. (2005) report that disparities in postsecondary enrolment trends between European American and African American youth with disabilities remain disproportionately high and that college degree attainment of African American students with disabilities is less than half that for European American students with disabilities. Booth et al. (2016) argue that for African American males with learning disabilities, barriers to education and employment include the disenfranchisement precipitated by the cumulative effects of exposure to racism.

In this article, I have argued that researchers need to engage with diverse voices, those of disabled students, disabled staff and disability support staff. Research in the field of disability and PSE therefore needs to be polyvocal. Having considered the insights that research into the intersectionality of dimensions of difference offer us, it is important also to stress that we cannot assume that each voice has just one story to tell; voices may be multi-tonal and we need to think carefully about what methods we can employ in order to be sensitive to each tone.

## **APPROACHING RESEARCH WITHOUT READY-MADE SOLUTIONS OR TRICKS OF THE TRADE**

In the research literature there are two frequently repeated narratives. The first narrative focuses on pedagogical barriers to inclusion and argues that if disabled students are experiencing barriers to inclusive learning in PCE then the solution to this problem is to implement universal design and to teach academics about universal design (see for example Kraglund-Gauthier, Young and Kell 2014; Liasidou 2014; Dallas, Sprong and Upton 2014). The second narrative focuses on wider institutional barriers to inclusion and adopts a social model of disability lens to examine what can be done to reduce barriers to participation for disabled students (See for example Lopez- Gavira and Morina 2015; Damiani and Harbour 2015; Booth et al. 2016; Diez et al. 2015). There is a tendency for universal design and the social model of disability to be uncritically presented as ready-made solutions within PSE. In this section I will argue that this tendency needs to be challenged.

### **Critiquing universal design as a ready-made practical solution**

There are three different variants of Universal Design in education. Universal Design as advocated by the DO-IT Program at the University of Washington (DO-IT, n.d.); Universal Design for Learning as advocated by the Center for Applied Special Technology (2007) and Universal Design for Instruction as advocated by the Centre on Postsecondary Education and Disability (McGuire, Scott and Shaw 2006). These three variants differ in the number and nature of design principles they espouse but at the core of all three is the need for proactivity (Burgstahler 2010). Firstly universal design is about anticipating the needs of a diverse group of learners. Secondly universal design is positioned as inclusive because it values diversity and equity; thirdly, disabled students are not required to continually advocate for access or accommodations. Possibly because there are different variants of universal design, it is common for the principles of universal design to be quite severely misinterpreted. Edyburn (2010) provides an excellent analysis of ten key ways in which he feels the principles have been universally misinterpreted and uses his analysis to warn that it may be impossible to implement something that cannot be consistently defined. I think this warning is appropriate, but what I wish to focus on is something different; not how universal design is implemented but the grounds upon which it is implemented.

Whilst it is unwise to treat any group of stakeholders in PSE as homogenous; generally speaking, one thing I learnt through my experience working in an educational development unit was academics have been trained to look for evidence and to question the evidence. Therefore, if we wish to persuade them to change their practice, in this case implement universal design principles; we should probably show them the evidence that it works. But the reality is that Universal Design advocates rarely engage in any depth with such evidence. They are often uncritical in their acceptance of universal design. This silence and lack of critical voice concerns me. Writing in the context of e-learning in higher education I have argued that a major area in which universal design needs critical examination is the lack of proof that universal design principles bring about their intended effects (Seale 2013). I gave three detailed examples to support my argument. Here in this article, I will give two additional examples.

In an article focusing on how faculty embed universal in their practice and the need for professional development in this area, Kraglund-Gauthier et al. (2014, 7) argue:

By increasing student choice and making connections with students' prior knowledge, student motivation to participate and to learn is also increased (Lombardi et al., 2011; Orr & Bachman Hammig, 2009).

A closer inspection of the references given to support the claim for increased student motivation, however reveals that the Lombardi, Murray and Gerdes (2011) paper is reporting a study on faculty attitudes to universal design and therefore offers no evidence regarding improvements in student motivation due to implementation of universal design. The Orr and Bachman-Hammig paper does offer some evidence in that it provides a review of studies that pertain in some way to the universal design principles. The review distilled out key themes across the studies and drew some tentative conclusions based on this analysis. As much research in the field is qualitative, we are unlikely to be able to conduct the kind of review where effect sizes and similar quantitative data can be tested across studies. However, I would argue that we do need to have some accepted process for interrogating this qualitative evidence. For example, the review by Orr and Bachman-Hammig included studies where universal design was not a specific focus and therefore not embedded in the aims or research questions of the studies in question. It is not clear to me therefore that their inclusion was appropriate in a review seeking to 'test' universal design. One example is the inclusion of the study by Beacham and Alty (2006) which was an investigation into the effects that digital media can have on the learning outcomes of individuals who have dyslexia. In the abstract the authors state that the 'purpose of the study was to obtain data that informed the development and design of e-learning and distance learning materials for universal use'. I would argue that 'universal use' should not be confused with universal design. In the beginning of the paper there is a small paragraph that acknowledges that there are different approaches to design and the work of the Centre for Applied Special Technology is cited but they conclude by stating:

However, it does seem from our observations that very little extra learning material is being produced for adult dyslexic learners and none concerning assessment. We therefore set up a more detailed study, centred entirely on addressing the effects that computer-based media can have on adult learners who have dyslexia. (Beacham and Alty, 2006, 75)

Based on this, I would argue, that Beacham and Alty are not positioning their research as being about universal design. Furthermore, as Edyburn (2010) argues; using technology does not automatically mean that you are using universal design. One approach to reviewing research evidence on universal design that I consider to be more rigorous is the systematic review conducted by Pino and Mortari (2014) who synthesized the available evidence on how the inclusion of dyslexic students can be fostered in higher education. In reviewing this evidence they argued for a flexible combination of universal design for learning and individualised support. While the reviews by Orr and Bachman-Hammig and Pino and Mortari both contribute in some way to the collation of evidence regarding whether universal design works, it does raise questions about what the community counts as valid or robust evidence that will be convincing enough to persuade academics to change their practice. In addition, I would suggest that it incumbent on advocates of universal design to be more critical of the evidence they are relying on to make their case.

In a study seeking to measure the attitudes of post-secondary faculty towards inclusive teaching strategies, Dallas et al. (2014, 14) state:

Applying UDI principles may lessen the need for individual accommodations (Ketterlin-Geller & Johnstone, 2006), therefore this could be a positive change in the inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education.

The cited paper by Ketterlin-Geller and Johnstone (2006, 167) discusses applying the principles of universal design to assessments. Because it is a discursive paper it offers no direct evidence for universal design, but it does cite one source of evidence:

For example, Dolan, Hall, Banerjee, Chun, and Strangman (2005) have found that students are more successful when flexible options (such as read-aloud approaches) are available to all students in an on-demand fashion

Interestingly, this is a rare empirical paper, mixed methods in nature, in which two conditions are compared. In a counter-balanced design students were administered a traditional paper and pencil test or a test using a computer-based system with optional text-to-speech (reflecting principles of universal design in terms of flexibility of delivery). What I like about this study was that it combined quantitative performance data with qualitative data to show that not only did the students perform better in the second condition; they preferred the second condition. It is really good to see studies like these; although we do need to be aware that it was conducted by researchers from the Centre for Applied Special Technology. Not that I am suggesting that they are biased. Indeed many of the originators of Universal Design have been much more cautious than their advocates in terms of the claims they make. For example, in addressing the question: 'can we develop the UD construct in a rigorous way?' McGuire et al. (2006, 172) warn against the dangers of perceiving Universal Design as a magical solution before it is more widely developed and proven:

The fields of architecture and design have called for the development of a 'critical theory' of UD involving the testing of suppositions ( i.e. UD principles) engaging in serious discourse and critical practice, implementing ongoing projects to document exemplars, and refining and validating the UD principles. In contrast to the quick solutions assumed to result from the application of UD to educational environments, this type of iterative theory building is essential to avoid the danger of yet another short-lived panacea for special education.

Ten years on from this, I would argue that the research field is still too prone to viewing universal design as a magical solution and that we need to apply a much more critical lens to the presumed evidence. I acknowledge that it might be hard to be the critical voice in a sea of positive voices, particularly when Universal Design has gained such influence over legislation and associated government funding programs and policies. For example in Norway, one objective of the 2003 ' Quality Reform' policy was to ensure that learning environments complied with the principles of universal design (Brandt 2011). With such high level governmental support the motivation to critically examine whether or not universal design is as effective as claimed may be, for some, quite limited. Hence my call for more 'socratic gadflies'.

### **Critiquing the social model of disability as a ready-made theoretical solution**

The social model of disability views disability as stemming from failure of the social and physical environment to take account of disabled peoples' needs (Oliver 1990). Disability is deconstructed as a social and political process (Ewens and Williams 2011). In the original model, the problems of disabled people are therefore not seen as within the individual person, but within society. In the field of disability and post-compulsory education the social model has been very influential. It has

influenced the debate on labelling (see earlier discussion) and it has influenced approaches to research, with many researchers adopting a barriers lens to the design and analysis of their work. Stodden (2015) for example talks of the need for campuses to be 'barrier-free' and welcoming. Wray (2012) talks about 'barriers and enablers to success'; while others talk of barriers to participation (Lopez-Gavina and Morina 2015; Damiani and Harbour 2015). Much of the barrier-related work has focused on attitudinal barriers (Booth et al. 2016; Diez et al. 2015) and institutional barriers such as lack of curricular adaptations (Diez et al. 2015) or the quality of service provision (Redpath et al. 2013). This work reflects the original version of the social model in that the overarching aim is to investigate how attitudinal and institutional contexts shape disabled 'disabled students' experiences of equal opportunities in higher education' (Berrgren et al. 2016). There is however growing evidence that attitudinal and institutional factors on their own are not the sole influences on successful participation of disabled students in PSE.

Some studies have identified environmental factors not related to the institution that appear to have an influence. For example, in a qualitative study, Babic and Dowling (2015) identified that support from family members was significant because they increased the individual's sense of security, belonging and self-esteem. There are also studies that seem to suggest an interaction between different enablers and barriers. Fichten et al. (2014) sought to develop a model to predict which disabled students will drop out before graduation and to investigate the drop out pattern of disabled students. Their analysis revealed that person-specific factors (such as disability, health, career direction uncertainty and lack of interest/motivation); social factors (e.g. financial constraints) and institutional factors (e.g. inadequate disability accommodations) contributed to academic persistence and drop-out. O'Neil, Markward and French (2012) conducted an exploratory study designed to determine which set of student characteristics and disability-related services explained graduation success among college students with disabilities. The final model they constructed included predictors related to gender, age, disability type, and disability-related services.

Studies such as these suggest that it is time to acknowledge that the social model of disability, as it is applied in PSE, offers too narrow a field of view. We need lenses that can expand our understanding of enablers and barriers to success for disabled students and in particular cope with multiple factors that interact in a multitude of ways. Some researchers have begun to demonstrate how this might be done. For example McLean, Heagney and Gardner (2003), draw on Murray-Seegert's ecological theory of diversity to examine successful transition of students with a disability into the higher education sector in recognition that cultural factors, the 'things outside' an institution, have a significant influence on the opportunities available to young disabled people. One example they give is how culture and ethnicity mould family attitudes and peer relations to disability.

Once we have acknowledged that the social model has served its political purpose in highlighting environmental barriers to inclusion, we can move forward and pay attention to different theoretical voices that offer us ways of not just identifying barriers, but understanding why they exist and predicting successful ways to remove them. In other words, research in the field can become more investigative, rather than simply seeking to confirm what we already know; that barriers to inclusion exist.

## CONCLUSION

In this article I have taken on the role of a 'socratic gadfly' to argue that researchers in the field of disability and PSE need to take become academic activists and take on more a political voice in their examination of exclusion and inclusion. Drawing on Julie Allan's (2010) framework I have identified six key areas where voices and silences in post-compulsory education need critical examination. If more researchers do not take up the call for academic activism, my fear is that the field will become stagnant. We need brave and creative new thinking about how we research and what we research. We need what Wright-Mills (1959) called a 'sociological imagination'; an ability to pull away from the situation and think from an alternative point of view. In doing so, it is my hope that research in the field of disability and PSE can do more than describe current oppression. It is my hope that we can chart paths to achievable alternative futures (Peters 2010).

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