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Affirming Strength-Based Practices in Disability and Inclusion: A Shared Autoethnographic Study of the Experiences of a Teacher

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Abstract

In this autoethnographic article we focus on the issues of “disability” and “inclusive education” and the challenges of being positive and affirming in this area of research and practice. As a teacher, I (Alina) continue to encounter regularly the dominant deficit view of “disability,” in spite of the extensive body of literature that advocates for the rights of people with disabilities as well as the benefits of inclusive education best built on strength-based thinking. The autoethnographic methodology allowed me to explore my experiences as an educator and reflect on specific events, presented through four vignettes that capture how my beliefs and values as an educator have formed over time. Throughout the article, I work closely with two academic colleagues (Ed and Jane), who become my critical friends, as I travel through this personal and professional journey that includes emotional reaction, reflection and academic analysis. I also engage with the emerging field of strength-based approaches to disability, as well as the importance of dialogue and justice, on an individual and professional level, with the aim of empowerment for students and teachers.

Keywords

disability, inclusive education, deficit thinking, strength-based practices, autoethnography

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Affirming Strength-Based Practices in Disability and Inclusion: A Shared Autoethnographic Study of the Experiences of a Teacher

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In this autoethnographic article we focus on the issues of “disability” and “inclusive education” and the challenges of being positive and affirming in this area of research and practice. As a teacher, I (Alina) continue to encounter regularly the dominant deficit view of “disability,” in spite of the extensive body of literature that advocates for the rights of people with disabilities as well as the benefits of inclusive education best built on strength-based thinking. The autoethnographic methodology allowed me to explore my experiences as an educator and reflect on specific events, presented through four vignettes that capture how my beliefs and values as an educator have formed over time. Throughout the article, I work closely with two academic colleagues (Ed and Jane), who become my critical friends, as I travel through this personal and professional journey that includes emotional reaction, reflection and academic analysis. I also engage with the emerging field of strength-based approaches to disability, as well as the importance of dialogue and justice, on an individual and professional level, with the aim of empowerment for students and teachers.

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Introduction

This article is an autoethnographic exploration of my journey as an educator; it is a piece of reflective writing about being continuously troubled by the widely used but inconsistently applied categories of “disability” and “inclusive education.” The disparity of terminology has been widely acknowledged by many (Anderson & Boyle, 2015, 2019; Haug, 2017; Waldschmidt, 2018). I remain perplexed at the salvo of negative and deficit views that still operate in the field and reflect about how the term “disability” is used in the discourse of some educators, leaders, the media, and by the general public. From my perspective, I see undue focus on disabilities and a lack of emphasis on the abilities and resources that each person possesses and has the capacity to use. A person with a disability continues to be perceived as one who lacks certain capacities, thus hindering the possibilities of becoming effective and contributing members of society and experiencing genuine agency. There is a clear dichotomy within the field of disability education, constructed on the distinction that assumes “[a]bilities and possibilities are considered to be good and useful, whereas disabilities may be impediments to human flourishing” (Vehmas, 2004, p. 38). For clarity, throughout the paper, the pronoun “I” refers to Alina’s voice, whilst the collective “we” braids together the voices of academic colleagues, Alina, Ed and Jane, with a mutual focus to gain further understanding and insight into my lived experiences. Although Jane and Ed are also my doctoral supervisors, we work in this writing space as a commune, contributing and critiquing each other’s writing.

The broader field of inclusive education is regulated by national and international policy and legislation, promoting opportunities for equal educational rights within inclusive environments (Disability Discrimination Act 1992, United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [UNCRPD], 2007, *World Report on Disability* (World Health Organization [WHO], 2011). The field remains a complex, contested and confusing policy and practice space. Inclusion seems “to be in something of a sorry state, characterised by confusion, frustration, guilt and exhaustion” (Allan, 2008, p. 3). It might also be characterised by a “rhetoric of elusiveness where inclusive education acted as a citational graft of integration” (Hodkinson, 2011, p. 180). These differing views and the apparent dichotomy between ideals about rights versus the reality of confusion and frustration leads us to critically assess, and where necessary challenge how we as educators work in this space. I have continuously encountered entrenched deficit views, practices and understandings that remain a dominant factor, justifying the often-exclusionary practices of education providers (Barton & Slee, 1999; Slee & Allan, 2001). It is preferable to acknowledge the strengths and contributions that all individuals, including those with disabilities, bring into our classrooms (Wehmeyer, 2013).

As writer and researcher, I am emphatically involved in this disputed space. Gannon (2016) states that “[w]e do not speak from nowhere” (p. 229) and we cannot “ignore or disclaim [the] author’s involvement as a human subject in his [*sic*] circumstances” (Said, 1978, p. 19). My professional and personal educational experiences have led me to view critically the negative impact of labelling and stigma, regardless of these concepts. Growing up in a country where I belonged to a minority group and working closely with refugees and students with different levels of abilities, I continue to develop further understanding and insight into the stigma that is associated to being labelled. I now reside in an avowedly multicultural country but still feel dissonance between what I have been observing and experiencing in my teaching career and my personal convictions about disability and inclusivity that drive my practice as an educator. Consequently, I find myself in a constant “struggle to retain [my] own humanity and dignity” (Allan, 2008, p. 130) in the face of thinking and practices that I have encountered within the field of disability.

This divergence of outlook was epitomised by a professional development session that I attended, and which is analysed critically in this article. The dominant deficit view evident in the ideas and language of this session compelled me to review every note that I had made at that session. This appraisal revealed a considerable contrast between my beliefs and those presented in the professional development session I attended. As an educator, I seek possibilities and strengths instead of deficits and wants. I build on differences, to instil a sense of empowerment, instead of enforcing gaps and divisions. In my own classes, I have always believed in creating rich opportunities for learning and growth for all involved, both teacher and students regardless of any categories or labels and have endeavoured to bring focus to existing abilities and engender respect for differences (Buntinx, 2013; Thompson et al., 2016).

My core focus in this article is to present my frank reaction to the persistent use of deficit thinking about disability and offer instead a more constructive destination: a place that affirms “difference,” reduces reliance on labels, and engenders optimistic possibilities about disability (Davis & Deponio, 2014; Niemiec et al., 2017). This is a place where I am looking for the human, the person, the student, instead of the deficit, the disability, or the shortcomings. I envision that all students, regardless of their differences, will have their strengths affirmed and contributions recognised, collectively providing opportunities to enrich learning, and foster positive experiences for not only students with a disability but all participants in education.

My goal in doing this work of critique is not to ignore the real and present challenges faced by students with a disability or understate their needs; nor do I wish to diminish the often-overwhelming pressures faced by teachers, since I too, as a teacher, have often faced such challenging teaching situations. Teachers are “extraordinarily busy professionals” [for whom]

“[t]eacher time is a scarce resource” (Shaddock, 2014, p. 12). The increasing expectations of teachers “have become more intense, demanding, and more difficult to respond to, placing considerable demands on teachers” (Forlin, 2010, p. 4). This paper grew from the reflective notes I wrote after a professional development session. This experience is captured in my third vignette. The more I thought about what I had experienced and how I felt about it, the more I wished to expand and explore the frames and understandings that surrounded and entwined my thinking.

I want to shed light on the proclivity towards negative stances that continue to preoccupy our teachers, administrators, and schools, forming barriers to achievement instead of building a strength-based approach to disability and inclusive practices (Cologon, 2019; Shut Out Report, 2009;). I also use this opportunity to bring attention to possibility thinking about “difference”: where all students have the right and expectation of a successful, positive experience of learning, and educators can “think about the possibilities we can create for ourselves when we attempt to reach out to all learners” (Ainscow, 2016, p. 86).

The narrative vignettes used in this article reveal a personal journey of reflexivity about disability education and the application of inclusivity in educational settings. To assist me with exploration of this journey and my coming to a position of resistance to deficit understandings of disability, I enlisted the support of my colleagues and critical friends, Ed and Jane to help navigate through the tumultuous feeling of despair that I felt as I faced ingrained deficit views. Throughout this article their perspectives, analyses and critical positions are integrated within the writing and reflect both our vibrant conversations and the critical textual practices that followed in composing this work (Campbell et al., 2004). It is difficult to be equivocal about whose bit of the writing is this and whose is that. This is my story for sure, but it has become theirs as well; so, while I use only my personal voice throughout this article, I can hear their voices in the writing and supporting each part of its constitution.

The Complex Landscape of “Disability”

The extensive body of literature in the field of “disability studies” is testimony to its complexity and to its universality in all educational settings (Slee, 2011, 2018; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2019; White et al., 2017). The World Health Report on Disability states “[d]isability is part of the human condition” (WHO, 2011, p. 3). Currently, 110-190 million people experience different forms of disability globally (The World Bank, 2019). The dominant paradigm in this field is the medical model of disability (Siebers, 2008), which locates disability within the individual as it becomes a “defining characteristic and identity and shorthand for a general incapacity” (Barnes et al., 2006, p. 19). Alternately, the social model of disability, whilst recognising impairment/s that affects an individual, draws attention to societal obstacles. The core argument is that “disability is created by hostile cultural, social and environmental barrier” (Oliver & Barnes, 2010, p. 552). Ultimately, it is paramount to remember that these interpretations have a direct effect on millions of lives worldwide as “is both a common personal experience and a global phenomenon, with widespread economic, cultural and political implication for society as a whole” (Barnes et al., 2002, p. 2). Medical and social models of disability continue to affect and shape policy development and practice, influencing lives, including students that we as educators regularly encounter in our classes.

In this paper, we want to move beyond these models and position disability within an understanding of the universal human right of education and the empowerment that students with disability can experience in being accorded this right fulsomely (UNESCO, 2019; United Nations, Sustainable Development Goals [UNSDP], 2019).

The “Right” for Education

The provision of an equitable education within inclusive schools has become a focal point for global, national, and state legislation (UN Sustainable Development Goals, 2019; UNCRPD, 2007). The UNESCO definition of “inclusive education” asserts that:

All students can access and fully participate in learning, supported by reasonable accommodation and teaching strategies tailored to meet their individual needs. The concept of inclusion is part of all aspects of school life and supported by culture and policies. (UNESCO, 2019)

Therefore, we recognize vital roles that education plays in transforming the lives of people with disabilities, to ultimately lead them to feel “included or excluded in a society” (Shakespeare, 2018, p. 106). We also acknowledge the complex needs that teachers may encounter during the day-to-day teaching and learning process. Ultimately though, what remains critical is the increased “self-esteem and social capital [that] are strongly influence by educational experiences” (Shakespeare, 2018, p. 106).

Encouraging Dialogue

A fair, equitable and accessible education for students with a disability is not possible without authentic dialogue and critical debate at local, state, and national levels. Freire & Macedo (2000) acknowledges the importance of dialogue as a human phenomenon, explaining that,

dialogue imposes itself as the way by which [we] achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity [and an] encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized. (pp. 88-89)

Furthermore, he warns against inauthentic dialogue that will not be able to transform a reality if the “word is deprived of its dimension of action” (p. 85).

This article, in the vignettes that follow, is about such dialogue as we focus on the exploration and reflection of my views and experiences as an educator reflecting on the inclusion and disability context. My reaction to the views presented in the professional development session (presented in the third vignette), provides the opportunity to encounter “word” and “action,” in critically thinking about the arguments presented, reacting to these views, and envisioning more informed action that can create positive learning environments and bring authentic inclusive experiences to my students

The Dominant Bleak Outlook

It is important to acknowledge that regardless of the various global, national, and local developments in disability and inclusion, the realities of daily life for people with disabilities remains bleak, as they continue to face isolation, barriers, challenges, exclusion, and even stigmatization. In Australia, the “Shut Out” report (2009) describes these experiences by stating that people with disabilities,

find themselves shut out. People with disabilities may be present in our community, but too few are actually part of it. Many live desperate and lonely

lives of exclusion and isolation ... [they] find themselves socially, culturally and politically isolated. They are ignored, invisible and silent. (p. 1)

A similar situation can be seen in many schools. Consequently, regardless of the work to achieve inclusive education for all, the practices of exclusion and isolation of students with disabilities continue to be a common occurrence for many students and their families. The influential and still relevant Shut Out (2009) report emphasises this sober reality, stating that “the education system continues to fail to respond to the needs of students with disabilities, and, as a result, these students continue to lag behind on a range of attainments indicators” (p. 47). Importantly, the report concludes that this state of play is not “a reflection of a lack of ability of students but of the failure of the system to meet their individual needs” (p. 47). A chasm persists between the learning opportunities for people with disabilities and those without.

A Call to be Alert

In my practice, I feel compelled to remain alert and be critically aware of acts of exclusion that pervade educational thinking and practice. Slee (2011), warns of the dangers of prescriptive policies about disability and points to the need for continued “recognition of the unequal social relations that produce exclusion” (p. 39). I see social exclusion that comes in all forms, as pervasive and long-standing, thus “exclusion has come to be seen as natural: it is a part of the order of things” (Slee, 2013, p. 897). Slee encourages teachers to be vigilant and careful as exclusion, a complex and pervasive phenomenon, penetrates our lives and classes. Slee (2013). Meanwhile, being aware leads me to new ways of making meaning. I concur with Shakespeare’s view that disability is “both extremely interesting and rather complicated” (2018, p. 1). This leads us to construing thinking and strength in conceiving disability, without ignoring the evident complexity of disability *in situ*. Our emphasis on the interesting and complicated brings out possibilities in reimagining inclusion and disability.

Methodology: Autoethnography

In this autoethnographic writing, I am recounting my practice stories and positioning these stories within a critical framework. Autoethnographers seek “to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 1). Through this process, I place myself within the social context and reflect on my lived experience (Reed-Danahay, 2017), providing an opportunity for close reflection, interrogation, an exploration of my own beliefs and values, and an opportunity to enhance and transform my understandings and assumptions. Thus, autoethnography “requires that we observe ourselves observing” and to “rethink and revise our lives, making conscious decisions about who we are and what we want to be” (Holman et al., 2016, p. 10). This approach provides the means to examine my experience of attending a professional development session that addressed the topic of disability and inclusive education and critically evaluate the notions of difference and disability as they relate to the session. Throughout the vignettes that follow, I explore my lived experience of attending this session. As I go through this journey of reflection, I am also presented with the opportunity of unpacking the core values and emotional engagement within my role as an educator, and to observe and critique aspects of the evolving learning journey that continues to shape me as a teacher. All three of us are experienced teachers in primary and secondary schools and have shared teaching and learning spaces with diverse student with diverse abilities and “disabilities.”

Whilst the goal of the professional development session that I attended was to provide new insights into the practice of disability and inclusive education to enrich the competence of participants in this area, the overwhelmingly negative framing offered by the presenter, who emphasized continuously the strenuous burden that students with disabilities bring to our classes, filled me with outrage. Autoethnography is a methodological approach suited to understanding the disposition of this outrage. My critical analysis deals with specific points in teaching experience and personal learning that have shaped me as an educator in the disability space (Denzin, 2014). Exclusionary practices and attitudes that I have been witnessing in various educational settings have come to the fore in adopting an autoethnographic perspective and this has allowed me space for personal eruption and criticality about the ideas and beliefs that drive practice and thinking in this field.

Indeed, autoethnography consistently confronts the tension that exists between being the insider versus the outsider (Calva & Tilly-Lubbs, 2016). Describing and evaluating this professional development session has led me to observe and better understand my own personal beliefs, reflect on specific moments in my own life that have shaped me as a person and educator, and focus on “reflexivity” in order to name and integrate intersections between self and society (Adams, 2015, p. 2). Thus, through recalling the event and considering its constitution, I experience a different way of being, that “requires living consciously, emotionally, and reflexively [providing the means] to consider how and why we think, act, and feel as we do” (Ellis, 2013, p. 10). The significance of writing autoethnography is that we base our stories on our memories and lived experiences; and in the process of analysing and communicating stories we create meaning, (Giorgio, 2013). Autoethnography also “places the author in the center of the text; the author’s memory and voice, not to be parsed, not omniscient, create the story” (p. 407). My lived experience of the professional development embodies this meaning making. Although my focus is on a single experience, and scrutinizing each detail of the session, I also link this experience to beliefs that have influenced my practice in working with disabled students.

Analysis and Discussion

I present four narrative vignettes based on written journal entries that describe and reflect on specific events and memories and relate to the global theme of “inclusive education.” In these vignettes I mention other artefacts that focus my attention—the haunting photographs that I saw as a child and letters that offered me opportunities. I do not have those artefacts now, but they sit in my “mind’s eye.” I selected these vignettes from many as they capture epiphanic moments that triggered reflection and response in me. I present and analyse the vignettes that explore events and factors that continue to shape my beliefs about inclusion and disability as a teacher. I employ key ideas that have been selected from my raw notes and drive my passion regarding to strengths-based approach to disability. Each vignette begins with a personal narrative followed by a discussion and analysis section.

Vignette #1: A journey, a destination, a passion

The search for words that describe the beginnings of my journey, my upbringing and life experiences so far, has taken me to existential destinations and meaningful moments that have contributed to the transformation and consolidation of my identity, shaping the person as well as the teacher that I am today (van de Goor et al., 2017). In the first vignette I visit my personal history and ethnic background.

Allow me to begin with my Armenian background and upbringing. I was born in the Armenian Diaspora. I am a third generation Armenian Genocide survivor. Growing up in Syria, whilst feelings of safety blissfully engulfed my family, my young self was constantly haunted by my grandparents', and a handful of relatives', survival stories; in particular, I remember feeling worried about those silent moments as they remembered their loved ones who never made it to safety, those whom I never had the opportunity to know. Over the years, I always felt disturbed by the silent photographs paraded past me in yearly commemoration events that showed scores of skeletons, or the lines of people who were forced onto death marches. Whilst I asked questions and listened to my mother's explanations, what remains clear in my mind is the way I used to make up my own stories on behalf of these character. In my imagination, I always fought back with the perpetrators and most importantly, gave them a voice and strived to empower them; this was my way of giving them the necessary knowledge and strength to fight back.

I believe that this strive for empowerment was instilled by my mother, who was a fighter herself and a beacon in our community. When I was young, my mother was the only "mother" that had a profession. She was a teacher, which meant that although I could not have the opportunity to get away with anything, since she knew all the tricks, I was blessed with the readily available knowledge and support, as well as the chance to develop a growing understanding of the importance of feeling empowered, one that education could bring to our lives.

Moreover, as a teenager, I enjoyed capturing the interest of my younger cousins and brother as I felt completely engaged in re-telling well known stories and fairy tales. I loved making adjustments to these tales, since I discovered that making such unexpected changes will create much discussion and debate and lead to laughter and joy. It was the sense of mutual enthusiasm that bound us together over many years. Perhaps a teacher was always lurking behind me in the shadows, waiting patiently for the right moment to be revealed, though I stubbornly dismissed the idea of being a teacher for many years.

Years later, after migrating to Australia and starting a new life, I decided to adopt a new path and follow my inclination towards teaching. This opportunity arrived through an acceptance into a post graduate degree in education. As an adult learner, a migrant student, one with a family and very young children (a toddler and a newborn), reading my letter of invitation for enrolment filled me ambivalence: with a mixture of competing feelings such as being relieved and ecstatic but nervous, stressed and even fearful at the same time.

My first lecture in the education degree represented a giant step forward in my life, although it was juxtaposed with an intense frustration regarding its timing, since it tore me away from my newborn son. It also separated me from my daughter, who at the time had a plethora of medical needs. My arrival was marked with teary eyes, wiped away, hidden away; with questions roaming around my mind, challenging my decision to even be there, and a constant push to leave the lecture room. Soon after, my negative thoughts dissipated as the lecturer simply walked in, and with most calming tone and inviting smile, she started her lesson. One of her first requests was a task that asked us to think,

reflect and write down our personal reasons that brought us here today, to this decision of beginning this journey of becoming a teacher. For me, the lecturer's manner and invitation for reflection were transformative, and she simply had the power to engage me instantly, sharing her knowledge and helping me explore elements of my identity and strengths that were pivotal for my learning journey.

From the hindsight of being teacher and academic, I see the mixture of complex experiences that have shaped the individual that I am now (Maalouf, 2000). On the surface, this rendering of my experiences may not seem to have a direct relevance to considerations of disability and inclusive education in contemporary classrooms. But it is now easy for me to identify the links from my formative experiences to the challenging space of disability and my work as an educator.

For a start, my Armenian ethnicity and the effects of experiencing the aftermath of genocide on my people and family, continues to impact how I relate to people who are forced to be silent without justification. The fact remains that my people have been subjected to "a limitless injustice which still continues today" (Mihai & Basarab, 2014, p. 68); moreover, they were excluded or forced out of their homeland, which continues to cause pain and suffering (Demirdjian, 2016). My concern lies within the act of exclusion itself: the attempt to silence a group for their ethnicity, a disabled person for their difference or a "difficult" student who may require a different pedagogical approach. These examples equate to a form of alienation or "othering." Foucault (1967) notes the institutional nature of this "othering" built through an "archaeology of silence" (p. xi.) My belief, constructed from my experiences of exclusion, provide a counter-narrative to institutional silencing and exclusion: through deliberative inclusion of everyone, I can give all my students a voice to feel actively empowered instead of remaining silent and thus marginalised.

Education can become a transformative space for survivors (Boyajian & Grigorian, 1998). Over the years, this fact was emphasized in our family continuously as my parents believed that receiving a good education took the utmost priority. This was coupled with my mother's love for her profession and the Armenian language that she taught; thus, in some ways, by preserving her language, she was giving voice to the future generations in her own linguistic and cultural ways.

Finally, going through the experience of migration, which inevitably left a permanent impact on my life, as I farewelled my family and everything that I loved and treasured (Dalla, 2008), led to a place of having no voice, of silence, for a period of time. Part of my journey is a search for my voice, that is, till I met the lecturer who opened up a gateway for reflection, agency and voice, and a chance to experience the transformative potential that education may bring into a life. Indeed, Goodman (2018) concludes that "educators have a power of a different kind to make a lasting difference in the lives of students" (p. 5).

Collectively, my background and experiences have been formative in my emancipative pedagogical approach to learning that focuses on the needs and agency of all my students. I strive to look for pockets of opportunity where I can encourage everyone to take part and feel included, where I too, can instil a sense of empowerment in my own students, and where we engage in agential moments of enthusiasm in our learning together. Freire emphasises that teaching "required a love for the very act of teaching. For only through such love could the political project of teaching possibly become transformative and liberating" (Darder, 2011, p. 190).

Vignette #2: Making sense of difference: the label of “disability” in an ever-competitive classroom

Making sense of my “differences” has always been a hard task for me. It has caused confusion as I continue to wonder about the reasons that drive some people to focus on specific cultural characteristics that are different to my own. This has forced me to feel somehow diminished and constructed by the single dimension of ethnicity. For me it all started with my Armenian identity, which was clearly not Arabic but in the Middle East. Soon after came my thick glasses, and the fact that I was forced to wear them since childhood. This was followed by my height which was considered unusual and was perceived as a deficit. Finally, my interest in books, stories, and studying was frowned upon by many in my culture, since it was considered “different,” and unsuitable for a girl who was supposed to be more interested in scoring a husband.

Since the beginnings of my teaching career, I have been working closely and consistently with various groups of students who are labelled “different” and did not fit into the general perception of what is “normal.” The bulk of my work was focused on working with groups of refugees from various countries such as Kenya, Sudan, Burundi, Iraq, Myanmar, Bosnia, and others; as well as students who are identified as having low literacy levels; and more recently international students who have their own specific literacy and cultural needs. I have worked with students who have had years of disrupted education, experienced various forms of trauma, or had issues with separation. In addition, these groups will also include students who were burdened with the label of “disability.” “Othering,” “refugee,” “language learner” and “disability” may overlap in this case, since collectively these students were expected to cope with the pressures that came their way and catch up with all the requirements of competency and conformity that our competitive education system forced upon these children. On the other hand, should they begin to falter, their fate would be sealed; they may be easily excluded in some form and eventually accommodated with more “suitable pathways,” thus they cease to be *our* problem.

At times, my encounters with this sense of the excluded other were even reinforced by members of my profession, leading to feelings of frustration. More importantly, though, beyond the anger and frustration, these encounters have consistently pushed me to look at “difference” from the other side, from the position of the “othered.” I have experiencing moments of great joy as my students share an experience that demonstrates enormous human resilience, and we as a whole group feel empowered. I recall the student who was a boy soldier and is rebuilding his life, and another with learning difficulties who developed a love for reading.

These experiences, whether they be about disability, experiencing war, or working hard to feel included, continue to challenge my own perceptions and I want to look for strengths. My educational goal, in this competitive world, is striving to build a classroom environment where we respect and feel empowered by our differences.

Currie (2004) states that the “condition of otherness is not a logical relation as much as a power relation” (p. 86). On the other hand, Foucault raises our awareness regarding the concept of “normalising power” that directs humans into what is “normal” and accepted in our families, schools and broader society (Foucault et al., 2002). Consequently, our individual experiences of “othering” may be dismissed by those around us since it does not fit into what is accepted by that particular community. The point that I would like to emphasize about my perceptions of experiencing “othering,” regardless of the fact that it may seem trivial to some, is the profound discomfort and sadness that characterised my childhood. This was exacerbated by a persistent lack of interest in my perspective, which was often dismissed because it was seen as marginal. The gap between the expectation of “normal” and my experiences as an immigrant has compounded my feelings of frustration and even anger.

Due to my own background and experiences of marginalisation, identifying instances of “othering” has become core to my teaching practice and pedagogical outlook, particularly when it concerns marginalised students and “students with disabilities.” In my work, I have always believed that it is imperative to recognise what my students bring through their idiosyncratic experiences, personal stories, challenges and triumphs, and that embracing these rich and powerful experiences offers significant learning opportunities for all students. Schuh (2017) explains that our students’ experiences are the “residue of what they have encountered in life” (p. 1). Through acknowledging such experiences of marginalization, we can learn together, challenge barriers that hold back students with diverse backgrounds and disabilities, collaborate about what we have in common, and enjoy the process of mutual learning.

I can hear the voices of some of my colleagues expressing concern regarding my perspectives about inclusion, due to the performance pressures in educational settings: most notably the current competitive, measurement-based, environment that is prevalent in many Australian schools, even in the public sector (Willis et al., 2019). The teaching profession is under scrutiny and evaluated against expected performance outcomes. In an interview, Giroux warns that this “overreliance on metrics and measurement has become a tool used to remove questions of responsibility, morality and justice from the language and policies of education” (Sardoc, 2018, p. 101).

My concern is also about the labels applied to marginalised students, especially those labelled with a “disability,” since this label carries negative connotations, including a belief that the person with a disability is worse off or disadvantaged (Oliver & Barnes, 2012). Grue (2016) suggests that “disability today is a label that signifies bodily difference and social marginalisation” (p. 958) whereas Shakespeare (2018) argues that “Disability is a multi-dimensional concept, which should be understood in terms of a continuum. Human perfection does not exist” (p. 5). While I see this complexity in my students, I also strive to encourage my students to utilise their diversity as strengths, not weaknesses. This strength-based approach envisions a future for students where they can embrace, use and celebrate their differences rather than feeling stigmatized and needing to hide away (Chakraborti-Ghosh, 2019; Garwood & Ampuja, 2019).

In the first two vignettes the ground of my beliefs about inclusion, marginalisation and disability were articulated, built as they are from my own experiences of marginalisation as an immigrant. I expressed, in concert with a growing body of literature, a strength-based approach to working with the diversity and challenges of students. It is with this strength-based and affirmative approach to inclusion and disability in mind that I come to describe and discuss the professional development session so central to the reasons for writing this article.

Vignette #3: The “expert” professional development and its deficit view of disability

The professional development session described here was organized to fulfil Victorian Education Department guidelines about inclusion and disability. It was presented towards the end of the 2018 school year in a large public secondary college in Melbourne, Australia. All teaching staff, support personnel and administrators were obliged to attend as part of their professional training obligations. Thus, it carried a weight of officialdom that other such PD sessions do not carry.

Encountering educational professionals who confidently outline the specific details of a collection of deficits, arguing that such negative traits will be linked to a student with a disability, is a painful experience for me. This vignette presents one of these experiences, as I attended a PD session, where I had to patiently endure the negative views that were hurled at a group of teachers, support staff and administrators.

The session was advertised as an important PD that addressed the issues of “disability” and “inclusive education.” Attendance for the teaching staff was a requirement as per the regulations of the Department of Education, and its particular focus was going to address the needs of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and intellectual disability (ID).

Since the beginning, I felt quite apprehensive, as various sessions that I have attended previously on similar topics, generally presented a bleak, deficit or negative view of students with additional needs. I felt sure that this will have a similar tone. Soon, the presenter was welcomed and introduced in an enthusiastic manner, explaining that she had several years of experience teaching students with disabilities in special education settings, although her current role was to support mainstream schools as an expert consultant about disability and inclusive practices.

The presenter’s initial remarks about her professional background immediately heightened my concerns. Her opening references to her current role of supporting “special students” who were just a few years ago in “special schools” and are now increasingly present in our mainstream schools because of “inclusive education” policies, caused me to question her views about diverse students. I began to wonder if the presenter’s goal was really about authentic inclusion of students with disabilities or simply rationalising departmental policies.

My doubts about her approach were very quickly confirmed. Yet again I was surrounded with the same negative, persistent, deficit views, which I believe continues to instil a sense of fear and validates ways of working with students with disabilities. Over the following hour of the presentation, I wrote down the stream of “othering” comments. This became a distracting method for me to avoid an angry outburst. The comments included phrases such as “impairment,” “can’t transform,” “can’t pace themselves,” “need prompting,” “get fixated,” “unable to move on,” “difficulty copying off the board,” “difficulty in retelling stories,” “cannot retain information,” “have major sensory issues,” “need

schedules,” “can’t cope with clutter,” “homework is like a dog’s homework,” “language disorder,” and many more.

Identifying the challenges of working with disability would have been appropriate, but there was an absence of any constructive or positive ideas about inclusion, as well as no mention of the strengths that these students bring into our classrooms. To add to my sense of outrage, the inevitable question of IQ levels arose, together with reference to IQ levels of 40 or 30, as she pointed to the fact that typically these students would not be in our schools since they had to attend special developmental schools (SDS), adding that “these kids are not going anywhere; they are staying and we could not do anything about it, so we need to work out a way to keep them there.” By now, I was almost in tears as I could detect a total lack of regard for the individual student who is supposed to be at the centre of our attention.

Throughout the session the presenter reiterated the entrenched deficit view of disability, as the choice of vocabulary consistently focused on negative characterisations of students with disability. She also repeatedly positioned herself as expert and this was reinforced by her identifying language as an “expert” in the field (Gee, 2005). Consequently, the audience were expected to accept her ideas as take-away knowledge, delivered without question. The presenter conveyed what Slee (2011) warns is the “retained [and] embedded assumptions about individual defectiveness and special educational needs” (p. 155).

The globally recognised right to “inclusive and quality education for all and [to] promote lifelong learning” (UN sustainable Development Goals, 2019) and the Victorian Government has outlined its education vision, announcing that “the government’s] promise is simple but bold: to build a world class education system and transform Victoria into the Education State” (Dept. of Education, 2019) did not underpin this PD session. Ongoing professional development is widely acknowledged as a key feature that “affects the collective ability and capacity of teachers in school to address challenges and solve problems that enable the organization to become more effective in its most important endeavour – improving student learning” (Martin et al. 2014, p. 44). In Victoria, it is a requirement by the authority that registers teachers (The Institute of Teaching) that all teaching staff must engage in twenty hours of PD sessions each year (Victorian Institute of Teaching, 2019a). In addition, to improve teachers’ abilities in the area of inclusive education, and as a part of the government Special Needs Plan, teachers are now required to build their capacity to teach learners with disability (Victorian Institute of Teaching, 2019b). This capacity, we argue, is best achieved through affirmative and strength-based practices.

The vital role teachers play in the lives of their students, particularly students who are differently abled, has been recognized through a considerable body of research (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017; Rae et al., 2011). Teachers are “the major source of variance in student learning” (Shaddock, 2012, p. 20) and continuous professional learning is vital to support teachers and maximise opportunities for all students. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) explain that “without a coherent plan for teacher training in the educational needs of children with [special educational needs SEN], attempts to include these children in the mainstream would be difficult” (p. 139).

Reflecting on this PD experience continues to evoke feelings of frustration and anguish for me. Regrettably, the presenter’s views represent a strongly held view in practice settings. According to Slee (2011) teachers “have learned to live in a condition of separation, neglect and antagonism” (p. 22). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge and critique the forms of institutional negativity about disability that have hitherto been normalised.

On that day, on a personal level, my anger and protest were internal and held in fuming silence. In describing and reflecting on this experience, however, new opportunities for further discussion with educational leaders, teachers or support staff now becomes possible. It is important for me to articulate my concerns and position such concerns as representing an issue of human rights; and thus, I concur with Barton and Slee (1999), who argue that the “struggle for inclusion [should] entail the serious effort to remove all forms of oppression” (p. 11).

Vignette # 4: To include is to empower, an example from practice

In my experience, deficit views about disability only serve to perpetuate difference, hindering attempts at meaningful inclusion, and leading to negative experiences for all involved in education—parents, teachers, administrators, and students. The following vignette presents an example of inclusion from my practice as an educator.

This educational interaction took place in one of my literacy classes at the Year 9 level during Term 2. Similar to most groups at the school, my class included students with a variety of strengths, abilities and challenges. On this day, I decided to plan a group activity for one section of my lesson. I also made a mental note of a student, who I will call “Kevin,” who has been selectively mute in every class regardless of my consistent attempts to include him in our activities. I decided to arrange the group work by selecting the students who had to work together for this task, placing Kevin with three girls, who I believed would be encouraging and supportive.

When I introduced the requirements of the group activity, I also announced that the members of each group had to collaborate and brainstorm ideas that they will have to share with the whole class at the end of the activity. Of course, Kevin was reluctant to participate, but before asking him to join the group, I spoke to him in private, informing him that I was expecting him to work with this group, adding that he does not necessarily need to speak. Instead, I gave him the option to write on his iPad in order to contribute ideas to his group. In order to avoid the girls’ apprehension about having Kevin in their group, I announced that in this class, when we do group activities, I may decide who should be in specific groups; but at other times, I may allow them to form their own groups.

Soon, the students began working as I moved amongst the groups joining in their discussions, contributing, and providing targeted advice. As I approached Kevin’s group, I noticed that his body language was showing signs of distress, he was bending over his iPad and avoiding eye contact. I also overheard the girls in his group expressing their concern about Kevin’s seeming inability to talk, saying, “He won’t talk!,” and suggesting that he “Just say something, just one word even.”

Immediately, I made my way to the group and added something along the lines of: “Guys! If we pay close attention and listen carefully, we can discover the amazing fact that we can communicate with each other in many different ways.” I reiterated that Kevin can communicate his ideas, use his words and contribute to the group work by writing his words instead of speaking them.

I reinforced to the girls in the group that while we are used to people talking, there are also people who have the ability to use different methods to what we have been accustomed to. As I finished my comments, I was amazed to observe the close attention that everyone in the group, and others close by, were paying to my words. Most importantly, Kevin had the biggest smile on his face.

To me, this was a moment of empowerment for all, not just Kevin. Positively, Kevin did smile and then participated actively during the rest of that group activity, but I believe that it was even more significant for the girls since they understood the value of communication regardless of the fact that the accepted modality (speaking) was not used in this case.

This vignette reveals my belief in the strength afforded by diversity, as well as the importance of implementing and achieving practical inclusivity practices that involves everyone. Richler (2015) emphasizes the “need to transform existing systems so that inclusion and quality are the defining characteristics” (p. 9). Clearly, my approach to Kevin and the girls in this group presents a stark contrast to the deficit view of the professional development session explored in Vignette 3. This example from practice reveals what Smith (2010) suggests is the clear, unequivocal academic and social benefits for students with and without disabilities, across a variety of age ranges and educational disciplines” (p. 41). My goal, in line with Smith’s words, is to utilize opportunities that may highlight the significant benefits and possibilities that a strength-based inclusive education brings to my own experiences as a teacher, and to my students with or without a dis/ability. By contrast, the deficit thinking that characterised the professional learning session described above mitigates against such possibilities.

The vignette presents just one moment from classroom practice, but the issue of deficit thinking is system wide. I contend that educational systems have the power and the wherewithal to achieve better outcomes, reframe challenges and hurdles positively, and include students with disabilities as assets to learning in classrooms. Calderon-Almendros and Habeqger-Lardoeyt (2017) highlight the potential power of educational systems for people with disabilities by stating that “education plays a key role in the attempt to not cling to biological limitations, but to hold on to culture as a means to achieve new levels of freedom” (p. 6). In my practice as an educator, it is imperative that such freedoms are not diminished in fully inclusive educational settings, like I have envisaged in reflecting on my classroom practice with Kevin.

In my practice, I am constantly aware of the effect that I can make on my students in terms of being fully inclusive and differentiating for the students who come to my class. Throughout the hectic, mad rush of being a teacher in a classroom, it may be difficult to recognize such an important value, although, I aspire to providing a rich opportunity for all to learn and feel included and empowered. For instance, by encouraging the girls in the group to listen to Kevin in constructive ways, I believe that I gave them the chance to move away from fear in regard to Kevin’s difference, whilst, at the same time, empowering Kevin to feel confident with his choice of communication modality.

In sum, my work is geared toward creating learning opportunities that moves away from categorizing and labelling or looking for the deficits and shortcomings in my students; and instead strives to bring out their strengths, giving them the learning tools and affirming their ability to succeed. I desire to build my practices around the possibilities inherent in strength-based practices, as “the person’s own abilities and strengths are explicitly considered before calling in other resources. Thus, the empowerment of the person has a high priority” (Buntinx, 2013, p. 16).

Discussion

Throughout this article, my goal was to explore and critically engage with the unwavering determination that I feel to stand up and challenge any type of marginalisation that I may encounter, which harbours deficit views. In my experience, to feel isolated, whether it is due to race (the first vignette) or disabilities (presented in subsequent narratives) may easily push an individual to despair. Clearly, even time does not diminish the extent of such anguish, as I continue to feel the remnants of the discrimination that my grandparents have been exposed to, as Armenians.

Taking on the perspective of both a teacher and an academic, provided me with the opportunity to look closely into experiences of “othering” disability and inclusive education. My aim has always been to foster positive inclusive practices in my classes. Often, I feel overwhelmed with the negative deficit views, the careless negative remarks that are spoken casually, with little concern about such embedded negativity, and the deficit outlook that continues to dominate schools and the society.

My emotive reaction to deficit thinking and “othering,” led to an exploration of possible links to my Armenian origin, upbringing and migrant experiences. Although, the encouraging and surprising revelation closely aligns my practice, critical reflections and attention to a growing body of literature that affirms strength, not weakness. I also engaged with developing an understanding of the complexity of disability, recognising the importance of each student and the uniqueness that they bring to the classroom. Wehmeyer (2013) states that “any discussion about disability must acknowledge that, fundamentally there is no such thing as a universal “disability identity” (p. 16), and that each student is unique in what is brought to the classroom.” I have also argued that inequality and exclusion lead to poor outcomes for students, and in our classes the aim must be meaningful inclusion for everyone (Slee, 2018).

The four vignettes reflect a journey of becoming an inclusive educator. Clearly, they represent the experiences of a single person, therefore, to generalise any findings would not be a consideration. In my opinion though, the narratives highlight the central role that meaningful reflection plays for any educator. My first and second vignettes provide examples of delving into meaningful moments and experiences that continue to lead me as an educator. My search has directed me to identify influence that have shaped my beliefs and consolidate my ideas in regard to the value of inclusion. Similarly, my grapple with the competing perspective she further shed light on the complexity of my profession, as I look for ways to support my students in the face of deficit thinking and a competitive environment in education. Throughout my delving and grappling, Ed and Jane were my sounding boards and co-entangles, finding clarity and complexity in my writing and understanding. I particularly appreciate their ability to help me find an etic position as researcher as I interrogate my emic and often emotionally charged reflections on my experiences.

Any future research, practitioners or policy makers may consider the third vignette, which I consider to be the existential centre of this writing. As I bring to attention my disquiet about a professional development session that constructed disability negatively, without regard for research that presents an emerging strength-based approach, I aim to raise awareness and provide a simple example (the fourth vignette) that encourages an affirmative, strength-based approach to disability, and the benefits it brings to our classrooms.

I want to build my practice within this positive framework and I concur with Churchill et al. (2005) when they state that “teachers never stop wanting to a make a difference” (p. xii). I continue to look for ways to support my students, particularly those who face extra challenges and difficulty in being fully included in school life. Richler (2015) emphasizes the benefits of inclusive education as a way that “allows young people to discover the humanity in others, and

not to fear difference. It's up to us to give them that opportunity" and "be the instigator of the transformation" (p. 9).

I finish with a poem I wrote that reflects the potency of individual power and strength in the face of great difficulty:

Have you ever been in the dark?
Suddenly, in complete darkness?
Where everything is unfamiliar
Where the strange is materializing anew

This darkness and this change is so sudden,
You are afraid, you may fall into oblivion
You are afraid, you may get it all wrong
You are lonely, stigmatised, hopeless!

Soon it is clear that this darkness is infinite
Adjustment may be out of the question
Fear is overwhelming, giving up enticing, but perhaps ...
Finding out a different way, is fast becoming the only way

Thus, comes a flow of new words, meanings, understandings,
Disability, ability, rights, education, rights, potential, rights,
But also, barriers, exclusion, isolation, attitudes and silent looks
But, it is this look, this silence, that pushes you to an eternal conflict

Have you ever been in total darkness? Sudden and complete darkness?
When you discover that you have the power to see,
When you begin to find your own way, enjoy the new light
When you triumph, when you achieve, regardless of all the odds

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