Ally Scholarship: The Rocky Path of Trying to "Walk in Their Shoes" or Rather "Roll in Their Wheelchairs."

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Ally scholarship:

The rocky path of trying to "walk in their shoes" or rather "roll in their wheelchairs"

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I just completed my 21 year teaching. Exactly half of my life. Unlike many people who work in special education classrooms in k12, I did not come to the career through alternate certification. My undergrad was in Exceptional Child Ed- mental retardation. My Masters was in Learning disabilities with Emotional/behavioral disorders add-on for my interrelated certification. Over the year of teaching, mostly in high school setting for 19 of those years, I experienced changes from Resource model to co-teaching model and just in the last year with a change in workplace I am now working with students labeled severely intellectually disabled. For the past three years, I have been expanding my viewpoints through the Curriculum studies program to questions of power, and systemic inequalities in a variety of marginalized populations through personal accounts, historical work, and deep and meaningful work of many scholars. This change in viewing what I do and why I do with critical lens has been important to both my personal and professional development.

Growing up, aside from some minor visual impairments and terrible spelling issues, I was what I would consider very opposite of the children I taught, being in gifted and honors classes throughout high school and college. The difference between sympathy and empathy is large.

Intellectually, I get it. The concerns, the barriers, the struggles of both students and family members that have been labeled disabled. I have been firmly in the camp of the temporarily abled, or the “normate” to use a phrase some Disability Studies advocates use.

But I do not, on a daily, in a lived-experience sort of way, undergo the barriers in society, the intersection of labels to include “disabled” that the students I work with do, the adults I collaborate with in my interest of assistive technology.

I am beginning my dissertation process. As I read the theoretical underpinnings, especially in the area of Disability studies, I am experiencing a range of work from the erudite
and scholarly of theoretical lenses, and the personal, and earthly autobiographical work of authors who proudly declare their membership with the disability rights movement, or at the least their personal journey such as Simi Linton and Jonathan Mooney.

I consider it an important question as I approach my work, research and scholarship to consider the benefits and limitations of the inside scholar/outside scholar dichotomy. I would be considered an outside scholar. I am “TAB” temporarily able-bodied. Had I decided to work through lens of feminism, I could pull on personal experiences of marginalization. But I am working from a position of privilege in both my racial makeup and my abled-bodied status.

What I would like to consider my work, that of an Ally. White scholars working in CRT, men writing about feminism, CIS working in areas of queering, and the temporary-abled writing in disability studies. Allies join together in the fight, this brings up the language of advocacy, agency essential to idea of social justice. The idea that more than words matter but words translated into actions. The work in Disability studies as much of the work related to other marginalized populations can directly tied into both Civil rights and the pragmatic daily life barriers that we should be and expecting society to accommodate.

How does this affect my work and research? I will be collecting counterstories of people labeled dis/Abled by society. I will be exploring their connection to technology and how that changes their outlook and view of themselves, their identity. All work using narrative and counternarrative methods, and honestly all qualitative and quantitative work gets collected in service to a researcher’s agenda. The filter, the lens has the potential to focus the conversation, create themes and commonalities. But how much of the participant’s voice will get lost? If my job is to represent THEIR story, not diminish THEIR agency in sharing their voice, how do I balance that with the needs of the research question?
Is it enough to be aware and worried during story collection and analysis? Will an Ally researcher ever “get it right?” I know if I tried to experience life using tools and aids some of my friends and students use you would see a terrible “wheelchair driver.” I am actually pretty terrible driver when i move my students in the hallways of the high school to band class or the lunchroom.

Can my position of privilege as temporarily-abled, part of the normate, part of a socio-economic class not experienced by many people with disabilities…. Can I leverage what positions of power I do experience to help bring the voices, the agency the social justice of a group of people I have come to care about deeply in my life? Is that how I can negotiate that rocky road of ally scholarship?

I may not know how to respond and get it “right” but I feel it is important to try, even if I don’t get it completely. I believe in stewardship as an educational practice. By building relationships in my classroom with students, with parents, and outside the classroom through community partners and service providers I can continue on a daily basis be aware how I can be an ally without becoming someone that denies agency and advocacy by a “prescription.” In k12 the requirements of Individual Education Plans fit most firmly in a deficit model of disability, with a techno-rational/behaviorist view that the “professionals” in the room know what is right for that student to progress and be their best self. Even with the requirement of transition plans that include student input on post-school goals, often we are experiencing a very top-down orientation. The tension in continually resisting that model of education and embracing a dialectical co-constructed view of progression and learning can be draining.

When I worked with students labeled with milder disabilities such learning disabilities, autism, other health impairments of mild seizure disorder or ADHD, it was very difficult to build
in those ideas of co-constructed learning. The pressure to overcome learning variations in pursuit of course credit, to get the hallowed “gen ed” diploma and find the right post-secondary experience to create a “useful, working citizen” was crushing where high school often a torturous prospect to “get through” so the student could eventually “do what they love.” In self-contained setting where the standards are given more flexibility to meet the more basic needs of students there is not as much pressure to conform to the normate, but still a hard tendency to prescribe what is best and often infantilize the 16-22 year old students I work with.

My challenge is to try to always remember and preserve the dignity, acknowledge the wisdom of the lived experiences of the people I will be working with toward my research goals. Paired with action into advocacy, and working with community partners this could be transformative education into social justice not only for those labeled disabled, but also for allies in the fight, like myself. My question at this collaborative space is this struggle, tension enough for me to work through and be aware to represent the counterstories of those labeled disabled as my status as an ally, leveraging my temporary abled-bodied privilege?