

Sunflowers, hidden disabilities and power inequities in higher education: Some critical considerations and implications for disability-inclusive education policy reforms

Power and Education
2023, Vol. 0(0) 1–15
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DOI: 10.1177/17577438231225140
journals.sagepub.com/home/pae



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Abstract

The article discusses recent Higher Education (HE) initiatives to introduce the Sunflower Scheme, which enables students with hidden disabilities to 'discreetly' indicate the existence of a disability to access support. A significant problem related to persons with hidden disabilities lies in their frequent reluctance to disclose their disabilities because of discriminatory attitudes that arise not only due to the dominance of arbitrary fabrications of 'normalcy' – aligned with elitist and human capital HE discourses – but also due to the lack of recognition of the existence of hidden disabilities. Even though the Scheme has been touted as a method that recognises hidden disabilities in HE, it, nevertheless, reinforces discourses of 'misrecognition' that create power inequities and project subordinated identities. The article argues that introducing the Scheme in HE constitutes another manifestation of disability-related initiatives that reinforce individual pathology and paternalistic discourses of dependency. The article contributes to a policy dialogue on the need to introduce alternative forms of provision to foster disability-inclusive practices in HE and makes a case to

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empirically capture the 'lived experience' of the Scheme in the context of Disability Equality policies in HE.

Keywords

(Hidden)disabilities, sunflower scheme, power inequities, inclusive education, higher education

Introduction

Disability has historically been viewed through a deficit-oriented and individual pathology lens that portrayed people with disabilities as 'lacking' and 'being inferior' to ontological embodiments of presumed corporeal, intellectual and psychological integrity (Campbell, 2009). Notwithstanding global and national legal and policy endorsements of the social-relational and rights-based nature of disability (UN, 2008), the latter is still conceived of as an endemic and immutable aspect of a person's makeup: an ideological presupposition that undermines efforts to foster greater inclusive policies and practices in HE (Gabel et al., 2016; Liasidou and Mavrou, 2017). The depoliticisation of disability experience can be attributed to the pervasive influence of biomedical perspectives in monopolising the notion of disability and reducing it to a form of 'individual pathology'. These deficit-oriented perspectives provided a rationale for the unequal and discriminatory treatment of disabled individuals who were given a subjugated and deficient ontological status (Shiffrer and Frederick, 2019).

The systemic exclusion of students with disabilities from HE has resulted from the sanctified status attributed to the notion of 'normality' (Madriaga et al., 2011). The latter is closely aligned with the elitist and human capital discourses that prevail in HE institutions that have positioned disability 'as the inverse or opposite of higher education' (Dolmage, 2017: 3). The prevalence of ableist and neoliberal discourses is mainly responsible for the historical under-representation and high drop-out rates of students with disabilities in Higher Education (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2013; Gale and Tranter, 2011; Gibson, 2012; Newham, 2020; Veitch et al., 2018). Even in cases where students with disabilities have access to HE, they are more likely to fail and drop out (Barnes, 2007; Beauchamp-Pryor, 2013; Gibson, 2012; Sachs and Schreuer, 2011), due to the ways in which they 'are placed in vulnerable positions to disclose their impairments' as a precondition to access support (Madriaga et al., 2011: 917).

As a result of their fear response to the stigmatising and discriminatory ramifications of disability disclosure, most students with disabilities are reluctant to disclose their disabilities to access support (Dolmage, 2017; Gabel et al., 2016). This is particularly the case for students as well as academics with hidden disabilities (Alshammari, 2017; Thompson-Ebanks and Jarman, 2018), who face 'the problematic reality of disability disclosure in higher education' (Pearson and Boskovich, 2019: 2). This problematic reality is mirrored in the 'dilemma of disclosure' (Newham, 2020; Rooney, 2019) experienced by people with hidden disabilities who must constantly weigh the benefits and challenges of disclosing an unseen disability (Brown and Leigh, 2018; Lingsom, 2008).

Hidden disabilities refer to non-visible disabilities that can range from stroke, multiple sclerosis, back pain, mental health problems, heart disease, cancer that can cause loss of functionality, chronic pain and fatigue that impair a person's ability to carry out their day-to-day activities. Despite how disability is a social identity analogous to race/ethnicity and gender, it differs from other attributes of marginalised and oppressed groups due to the embodied dimensions of disability experience and the importance of 'impairment effects' in discussing the corporeal, cognitive and emotional dimensions

of disability experience (Corker and French, 1999; Crow, 1996; Morris, 1996; Shakespeare and Watson, 2001; Thomas, 1999). Williams and Mavin (2015) highlighted the role of ‘impairment effects’ in creating a career boundary for disabled academics and students as an issue that needs to be considered when discussing Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in HE.

The notion of ‘impairment effects’ is not limited to the biological dimension of disability experience but encompasses the ‘social dimensions of the biological’ (Thomas, 2013: 13–14). According to Thomas (2012: 211), ‘impairment and impairment effects are always bio-social, and culturally constructed in character’. Disability experience is thus ‘social as well as biological through the human traits we perpetuate as “normal,” the narrowly conceived structure of our institutions and society’ (Shrifur and Frederick, 2019: 4). This experience is further compounded by how hidden disabilities intersect with other ‘reified oppressions’ such as ‘racism, economic injustice, the “hidden injuries of social class,” gender inequities and the new oppressions resulting from the restructuring of the social welfare system to “workfare” amongst others (Lincoln and Denzin, 2013: 580). The ‘lived’ experience of disability is, therefore, marked by what Rai et al. (2020: 1) call ‘health-related stigma’, a ‘complex phenomenon, the experience of which intersects with those of other adversities arising from a diversity of social inequalities and oppressive identities’. As a result, academics and students with hidden disabilities are more likely than their non-disabled counterparts to engage in a labour-intensive process of juggling academic and social/family life demands to fulfil their academic duties (Brown and Leigh, 2018).

Despite the ostensibly well-intentioned nature of the introduction of the Sunflower Scheme (Runswick-Cole and Goodley, 2022; Tabbers Ltd, 2020) in enhancing the marginal status of hidden disabilities in HE, it risks depoliticising the ‘lived’ experience of hidden disabilities and the transformative ideological and institutional arrangements that need to be pursued to meet disability-related needs in effective and non-discriminatory ways (Dolmage, 2017). Even though the Sunflower Scheme is hailed as ‘a global initiative to support inclusive practice’ (University Website), inclusive practice is reduced to a paternalistic model of ‘supporting’ and ‘helping’ individuals with hidden disabilities to fit into existing institutional norms.

In parallel with Runswick-Cole’s and Goodley’s (2022) critical analysis of the Sunflower lanyard use in an airport, our analysis explores the recent introduction of this Scheme in a hundred and eleven HE institutions in the United Kingdom¹ and five HE institutions in the United States of America,² to unravel the ‘biopolitical work of such schemes in terms of what they give but, at the same time, what they might take away from (all) human beings’ (Runswick-Cole’s and Goodley’s 2022: 2017). Biopolitics symbolises the interplays of power and its discursive enunciations and ramifications that shape our understandings of (hidden) disabilities along with the biopolitical work of the Sunflower Scheme. These understandings have been monopolised by ‘psychological and psychiatric discourses [that] speak with authority about the vital character of human beings. And various educational, health and social care policies flock to attend to this vitalised phenomenon’ (Runswick-Cole and Goodley 2022: 2021). Through a biopolitical lens, ‘wearing the lanyard identifies..... someone in need of “help” but also as someone who may not conform to “normal” social rules’ (ibid. 2022:2018).

Students and academics with hidden disabilities are expected to be ‘discreetly’ singled out by exhibiting Sunflower artefacts to indicate that they ‘need additional support, help or a little more time’ (University Website) thereby signalling their ‘deviance’ from ‘established forms and dominant institutional cultures’ (Gibson, 2015: 878) rather than problematising institutional and ideological ‘norms’ and minimising the intersecting socio-political barriers that undermine access and success in HE (Dolmage, 2017; Liasidou, 2014). The phraseology enshrined in the Scheme’s rhetoric to ‘help’ and ‘support’ people with hidden disabilities portrays disability as a deficient

ontology in need of specific ‘accommodations’ (Guillaume, 2011) rather than a systemic problem rooted in and emanating from the ‘able-bodied’ social order (Campbell, 2009). Inclusion, in this respect, is ‘conditional and subject to negotiation’ (Slee, 2019: 914) between the wearers of Sunflower artefacts and their non-disabled peers, whereby the latter are urged to ‘sensitively ask if there is anything that [they] can do to support the wearer’ [of Sunflower artefacts] (University website).

Zembylas (2019:732–733) draws on Bulter’s idea of ‘living interdependency’ that problematises ontological binaries of ‘dis/abled’ bodies by acknowledging that all people are dependent on each other and privileging an ‘embodied ethics’ predicated on the assumption that ‘we are all dependent on and made vulnerable to others’. This ontological parity in the face of vulnerability and precariousness of our corporeal integrity is missing from the dis/abled-bodied hierarchisation enshrined in the Sunflower Scheme’s bilateral expectation to provide ‘additional support, help or a little more time’ (University website) to students and staff with hidden disabilities. This bilateral expectation is predicated on an ontological hierarchisation that, according to Wolbring and Lillywhite (2021: 6–7):

impacts the intersectionality between disabled people and others. The perception of ‘self’ is influenced by the role that one occupies in the social world. The perception attached to oneself influences the role one seeks to have, and the role others think one could fill.

Even though the Scheme provides people with hidden disabilities the opportunity to declare their hidden disability on a preferential and contingent basis, it nevertheless reinforces the demarcation line between ideal, self-sufficient/autonomous and nonideal, needy bodies while ignoring how disability can be a facet of ‘a continuum of human interdependencies’ (Borg, 2018), and a potential ontology for everyone (Goodley, 2017). Echoing Matthews (2009: 233), ‘the mutability of disability as a category makes the disabled people a more appropriate paradigm of contemporary experience than existing fantasies of autonomous, perfect “able bodies.”’

Similarly, Goodley (2014) problematises ontological dichotomies that create and legitimise hierarchical social relations and dualisms of normative and non-normative ways of being calibrated against arbitrarily fabricated abled-bodied norms. The ideological undertones of the Scheme reverberate how policies and people’s perspectives in HE are informed by a deficit-oriented, bio-medical understanding of disability (Brown and Ramlackhan, 2022). This understanding is responsible for how disabled people are either excluded from or portrayed in biased ways in some Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives in HE (Wolbring and Lillywhite, 2021).

While the criticism levelled against the paternalistic and stigmatising undertones of the Sunflower Scheme might not represent the heterogeneous ‘voices’ of people with hidden disabilities’ in HE, self-narrated stories of the ‘lived experience of disability’ have historically documented the ‘weaponizing stigma’ (Scambler, 2020: 78) and its manifestations in seemingly innocuous social responses to disability. Seldom do these self-narratives concentrate on medicalised dimensions of disability-related pain; instead, their focus is on making transparent, quoting Siebers (2017: 115), their ‘political and epistemological pain’.

Autobiographical accounts of people with disabilities are replete with narratives of politicised dimensions of pain due to the ‘weaponizing’ effects of (dis)ablism and its ontological power to construct ‘inferior’ and ‘deficient’ subject positions that are inscribed in disabled people’s psyche, memories and self-perceptions (Torrell, 2016). This political and epistemological infliction of pain is lucidly articulated in Mason’s narrative of her embodied experience of disability (1992: 28):

We harbour inside ourselves the pain and the memories, the fears and the confusions, the negative self-images and the low expectations, turning them into weapons with which to re-injure ourselves, every day of our lives.

The magnitude of ‘political and epistemological pain’ experienced by students with hidden disabilities is mirrored in the ways in which these students are ‘often invisible on college campuses in part because many do not self-identify as disabled’ (Gabel et al., 2016: 2). Interestingly, it is empirically documented that in some Universities in the States, fewer than 1% of students in 4-year HE institutions identify as disabled (ibid: 3). The phenomenon of non-disclosure is even more pronounced amongst academics (Brown and Leigh, 2018). Based on these findings and Critical Disability Studies and Inclusive Education theorisations, it is not arbitrary to suggest that the Sunflower Scheme’s clarion call for students and staff with hidden disabilities to exhibit disability markers publicly, cannot be considered an ‘inclusive’ and ‘rights-based’ accessibility measure in HE. As Pritchard rightly pointed out (2021:555) while citing the example of the Sunflower Scheme, ‘why should disabled people have to prove their impairment?’ Why do they need to be ‘singled out’ and ascribed a ‘vulnerability’ status through self-demarcation and inconspicuous coercion to ‘link the personal and private to the public’ (Brown and Leigh 2018: 987). Though empirical data on the experience of the Sunflower Scheme in HE is missing, anecdotal examples of the experience of the Scheme in other settings highlight how some persons with hidden disabilities might not find the prospect of wearing a sunflower lanyard as a ‘subtle indicator’ of a hidden disability (e.g Finesilver et al., 2020; Saddler, 2019). Even the Scheme’s reference to the Sunflower lanyard ‘to be subtly visible when they need to be’ (Hidden Disabilities, no date cited in Runswick-Cole and Goodley 2022: 2023) infers how ‘a hidden disability is not, then, a matter of pride; it is something only to be “visible” when necessary, in other words, when it is necessary.....to know who has (and who does not have) a hidden disability and is legitimately in need of help’. In this respect, ‘biopolitics demands that we establish the “truth discourse” about a disabled person before help is offered’ (Runswick-Cole and Goodley 2022: 2023).

Disability, however, is just one facet of an individual’s identity that is constituted by an intricate and reciprocal web of diverse biological, social, biographical and other characteristics (Liasidou, 2016), and as a result, there are persons with disabilities who do not self-identify as being ‘disabled’ because disability or impairment does not constitute an integral aspect of their ‘lived experience’ (Annamma et al., 2013; Goodley, 2017; Watson, 2002). As appositely pointed out by Pearson and Boskovich (2019: 4): ‘the process of disability disclosure involves personal choices or statements that are dependent on how individuals situate themselves within the meaning of disability’. In this respect, the Scheme is problematic because it ‘is reliant on an individual student disclosing to the education provider’ and requires ‘[t]he construction of a disabled identity, where an individual student may not consider themselves to be disabled’ (Newham, 2020: 51).

The following section explores the ‘dilemma of disclosure’ faced by students and academic staff with hidden disabilities directly related to their decision on whether to wear sunflower artefacts to signal and, by implication, disclose their ‘hidden’ disability. Even though the analysis does not empirically capture the ‘voices’ of students and academic staff with disabilities, the discussion is grounded in disability studies scholarship whose nascent ideas and academic agenda have originated from people with disabilities and their ‘lived’ experience of disability (Corker and French, 1999; Morris, 1996; Oliver, 1990). As pointed out by Oliver and Barton (2000: 2): ‘In Britain at least and in our version of the story of the emergence of disability studies, disabled people have been absolutely crucial, providing the main ideas and shaping the academic agenda throughout’.

Given the centrality of the ‘voices’ of people with disabilities in past and future disability studies scholarship, the following discussion acts as a conceptual framework for future analyses in which empirical data on the ‘lived’ experiences of academics and students with hidden/invisible disabilities are included.

Hidden disabilities and the ‘dilemma of disclosure’ in higher education

A significant problem related to students and staff with hidden disabilities lies in their frequent reluctance to disclose their disabilities because of stigmatising and prejudicial attitudes that arise not only because of the dominance of arbitrary fabrications of ‘normalcy’ – embodied in elitist and human capital HE discourses – but also due to the lack of recognition of the existence of hidden disabilities. As a result, people with hidden disabilities experience a paradoxical phenomenon termed the ‘dilemma of disclosure’ (Newham, 2020; Rooney, 2019). On the one hand, they must go through a process of ‘bio certification’ (Sarret, 2016) by creating a persuasive disability narrative to access disability-related benefits (Rooney, 2019). On the other hand, disclosing their disabilities risks being accused of lying, exaggerating, being lazy or trying to exploit the system to access support and justify a lack of productivity. As pointed out by Brown and Leigh (2018: 987): ‘Invisible, less known or contested conditions are dismissed as a fabrication, malingering and an act of a fundamentally lazy or overwhelmed worker seeking validation’. Disclosure might also result in stigmatisation due to how disabled people are constructed as ‘negative ontologies’ who ‘deviate’ from arbitrarily fabricated abled-bodied norms (Campbell, 2009).

Disability labels can have traumatising effects, not only due to the vulnerable status attributed to disabled people that makes them more susceptible to abuse and other traumatic experiences, but also due to the traumatic repercussions of labelling, discrimination and stigmatisation (Szeli, 2019; Thomas-Skaf and Jenney, 2020). What is promoted is a ‘minority rights’ approach that emphasises ‘deviance’ from the norm through a singling out process of signalling a ‘hidden disability’ rather than a ‘universalist approach’ that focuses on changing the ideological and institutional premises of social norms to make it more accommodating to human diversity (Kayess and French, 2008). Even though minority rights ‘might protect key features of human identity’, they nevertheless ‘possess the capacity to divide people ... (and) create insiders and outsiders’ (Macklem, 2008: 531), thereby perpetuating power symmetries and hierarchical relations of dependency.

Reluctance to disclose a hidden disability is not, however, only due to anticipated discrimination and stigmatisation (Evans, 2019) but also due to the fear of reliving early experiences of discrimination and stigma that can result in a perennial process of (re)traumatisation (Torrell, 2016). This is why students and staff with hidden disabilities have developed, according to Couzens et al. (2015: 25), ‘the desire to closet early difficulties at all costs due to early stigmatising experience’. The psychological effects of hiding a disability can be ‘as problematic as the feared responses from disclosure’ (Asch, 2001: 6) due to their adverse effect on how people with disabilities function in society.

Even worse, ‘those with invisible disabilities may experience disregard or disbelief of their disability’ (Kelly et al., 2023: 2). A person’s hidden disability can be perceived as an imaginary, psychosomatic experience that does not exist outside a person’s mind. Even though hidden and invisible disabilities are used interchangeably, the two terms are sometimes semantically distinguished to differentiate between existent yet hidden disabilities and fictional disabilities. For instance, the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee (DPTAC) in the United Kingdom³ provides the following definitions they are cited on the government website:

- ‘hidden disability’ implies that people are purposefully hiding their disability.
- ‘invisible disability’ implies that the disability is in that person’s head and doesn’t really exist.

This distinction questions the existence of a disability and the sanity of those who might choose to disclose a hidden disability. Students and academics who read the second definition will become even more reluctant to disclose their disabilities to access the support they are entitled to.

The varied ways in which hidden disabilities are conceptualised and semantically presented are also evidenced in the distinction that can be made between ‘invisible’ and ‘non-visible’ disabilities, whereby the latter signifies ‘an unmarked social identity’ such as a disability that is not outwardly observable, and the former denotes ‘marginality or oppression of a social group’ while attending to how these ‘two meanings and conditions intersect, since no visible disabilities remain largely invisible, both in disability discourse and in the culture at large’ (Samuels, 2013: 329). Given these considerations and the largely invisible status of hidden disabilities in HE, the final section provides insights into how (hidden) disabilities should be reconceptualized as a dimension of diversity, power, justice and human rights while considering alternative forms of provision to foster disability-inclusive practices in HE.

Hidden disabilities and the ‘politics of change’ in higher education

As we have already discussed, even though disability can be a positive individual and collective social identity, as exemplified by the human rights model of disability (Degener, 2016), this is not what is currently promoted in HE. The Scheme’s rhetoric on ‘helping’, ‘being kind’ and ‘showing respect’ to people with hidden disabilities reverberates individual pathology and charity models of disability that are predicated on paternalistic discourses of dependency and protection and silence the ‘need for collective political solutions that change disabling social and physical environments’ (Matthews, 2009: 232). The charity model of disability constitutes an inconspicuous, albeit pervasive, means of reinforcing unequal power relations in terms of how disabled people depend on others to implement the bilateral nature of the Scheme to provide ‘help’ and ‘support’ (Oliver, 1990; Tomlinson, 1982).

In this respect, the recognition of hidden disabilities promulgated by the Scheme ‘coincides with, and likely depends on, some form of misrecognition’ (Sebrechts et al., 2019: 183) that is the ‘root cause of social inequality’ (ibid; 175). Discourses of ‘vulnerability’ and the paraphernalia of the politics of ‘misrecognition’ immanent in them result in ‘identity-based subordination’ that cement and perpetuate ‘institutionalised patterns of cultural value that constitute one as comparatively “lesser”’ (Knight, 2020: 2). The creation of social hierarchies is manifested in how disabled students:

must disclose in order to gain access, which often involves not mutual understanding but an imbalanced (and imposed) sense of power between the parties involved. As a result, forced intimacy is exploitative, exhausting and violating. (Pearson and Boskovich 2019: 13)

As rights-bearing subjects, students and staff with hidden disabilities should experience dignified and non-discriminatory forms of living, working and studying as their peers (Degener, 2016). Accessing these rights should not pre-empt discriminatory treatment. In doing so, disabled students and staff ‘would not need special attention or support, which would then eliminate the necessity to disclose their disability’ (Collins et al., 2019: 1485).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is inclusive and anti-discriminatory as it focuses on introducing curricula, teaching and assessment methods that facilitate educational accessibility and engagement for learner diversity without the need to introduce specialist interventions and accommodations (Burgstahler, 2012; Burgstahler and Cory, 2008; Dell et al., 2015; Rose, 2001; Thousand et al., 2007). This can be achieved by providing 'proactive approaches to accommodations' (Nieminen, 2022) and individualised differentiation to meet 'the myriad variations in learner needs, styles and preferences' (Rose and Meyer, 2002: 4) in non-stigmatising and non-discriminatory ways.

Even though UDL warrants educational accessibility based on ability and other markers of difference without the need to introduce specialist interventions and accommodations (Burgstahler and Cory, 2008; Rose and Meyer, 2002; Thousand et al., 2007), reductionist understandings of UDL (e.g. Knoll, 2009) run the risk of connecting 'universality' with 'normativity'. As a result, 'the needs of the majority once again trump the needs of those who have been traditionally excluded-people with disabilities' (Dolmage, 2017: 135). Hence, the Scheme could have been more universal if it catered for all people who, under certain conditions, might need help, thereby recognising how the notion of 'need' can be universal and have 'added-value'. As suggested by Hamraie (n.p): 'designs that produce disability access also have added value or benefit insofar as they are useful to non-disabled people' while considering 'issues of sex, gender, and intersectionality, ageing, size, race, and environmental justice' (cited in Dolmage 2017: 133).

A mono-dimensional emphasis on UDL and accessibility silences issues of difference and inequality that must be addressed to challenge oppressive and disabling discourses that marginalise some students (Burbules and Berk, 1999). A parallel emphasis should thus be placed on understanding how intersections of students' biological, racial/ethnic, gender and/or class characteristics, and other socio-political conditions and inequities, create barriers to their learning and participation (Guthrie and McCracken, 2010; Strnadová et al., 2015), the aim being to ensure fair distribution of and accessibility to educational resources and to dismantle power asymmetries and discriminatory regimes that create 'subjugated' and 'deficient' student identities (Burbules and Berk, 1999; Johnson, 2004).

The process of disability-inclusive education reforms in HE cannot thus be achieved unless the enduring legacy of charitable and deficit-oriented approaches to disability are problematised and deconstructed through HE programs and curricula that allow students to develop an understanding of how disability is a dimension of diversity, power, justice and human rights (e.g. Gabel et al., 2016; Liasidou, 2023; Liasidou and Mavrou, 2017; Liasidou et al., 2019; Matthews, 2009), to advance an equity-oriented and intersectional approach to conceptualising and meeting disability-related needs. Ableism constitutes an important intersecting variable that is 'always in a layered and complicated relationship with these other forms of structural discrimination' (Dolmage, 2017: 39). Mono-axial analytical frameworks promote a singular dimension of disability experience, which is limited to exploring links between disability and access to learning without taking into consideration how disability is constituted by and is interweaved with other cultural and social markers of difference (Goethals et al., 2015).

Feminist and other autobiographical theorisations of disability (Corker and French, 1999; Mason, 1992) lay bare the nexus of disability, power and identity, especially concerning 'non-normative' categories of disability (Barton and Tomlinson, 1981; Tomlinson, 1982), which are more likely to be implicated in the power/knowledge grid; Arbitrary dichotomies of 'disorder' and 'normality' (Corcoran and Slee, 2015) have legitimised the viewing of disabled people's identities in terms of an individual pathology perspective while ignoring the pervasive impact of power imbalances, discrimination and labelling on the construction of 'disabled identities' (Cole, 2009;

Garcia and Ortiz, 2013). The latter are relegated to the bottom of a hierarchical order of ‘ideal’ and ‘non-ideal’ ontologies that are constructed and calibrated against the ‘humanist subject’ (Goodley, 2014), which is conceived of as having ‘autonomy and self-referential disciplinary purity’ (Bridotti, 2013:145 cited in Goodley, 2014: 345); This ontological ‘a priori’ has engendered and legitimised hierarchical social relations, and even though ‘all citizens are “potentially” considered to be human, some are deemed “more mortal than others”’ (Bridotti, 2013:24 cited in Goodley, 2014: 343).

Rather than asking students and staff with hidden disabilities to make their disability visible by displaying sunflower artefacts, HE institutions should pursue transformative action to advance new forms of being, thinking and acting (Gabel et al., 2016) to foster socially just and non-discriminatory social and educational communities for all (Artiles et al., 2006). In this respect, widening HE policies and interventions regarding participation should focus on exploring the constellation of social vulnerabilities, power imbalances and structural inequities that impact disability accessibility in HE (Liasidou, 2023). This process necessitates recognising the nexus of disability, identity, intersectionality and power and its implications for creating disability-inclusive policies and practices in academia. By adopting an intersectional and disability equality perspective, the ‘lived experience’ of hidden disability should be understood not only against the backdrop of ‘impairment effects’, but also against the ways in which hidden disabilities intersect with other sources of inequities and injustices such as poverty and social class (Reay et al., 2001), as well as University status, given that ‘different inequities operate at universities of different status’ (McLean 2020: 95). As appositely pointed out by Slee (2019:910) ‘Belonging, it seems, is an accoutrement of privilege.... Other identity features intersect to form markers of separation, markers of not belonging’.

By implication, the exploration of disability accessibility to HE requires a new perspective that places a pronounced emphasis on disabled students’ and academics’ classed, gendered, racial, age, classed and spatial identities (Howard, 2000) and the differing impact of their intersectional identities on academic learning and performance evaluations. These considerations point to the need to adopt a critical approach to developing UDL curricula and pedagogies that consider the intersections of (disabled) students’ biological, racial/ethnic, gender and/or class characteristics and broader socio-political dynamics and inequities that undermine their learning and participation (Guthrie and McCracken, 2010; Strnadová et al., 2015). An intersectional perspective can be used as a heuristic analytical device to problematize individual pathology understandings of human identities that ignore ‘the complex interplay between social background, life circumstances, access to education, academic achievement and inequality’ (Rooney, 2019: 38).

Conclusions

The article has provided some insights into how the expectation to display ‘disability’ flagships to access ‘help’ and ‘support’ reverberates portrayals of disabled people as subjugated and dependent ontologies while silencing the necessity to problematize and challenge the legitimisation of ableist discourses, policies and practices that create and perpetuate power inequities and hierarchical social relations. The critical dimensions of attempts to create more inclusive HE spaces are still superseded by compensatory and remedial measures of support that focus on ‘caring for and compensating disabled students’ (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2013: 50) who are expected to self-identify as being in ‘need’ of accessing support and/or additional resources (Newham, 2020; Ryan, 2011): a process that reinforces ‘deficit orientations through the maintenance of stereotypes, inequitable power structures, cultures of exclusion and marginalising practice’ (Rooney, 2019:38) rather than interrogating dominant institutional norms and disabling barriers (Gibson, 2015).

The Sunflower Scheme constitutes another manifestation of disability-related initiatives in HE that have been shaped against a needs-based rather than a rights-based approach – whereby the latter includes but is not limited to the former approach – to meeting the needs of service users, thereby reinforcing discourses of individual pathology and ‘treatment’ associated with the individual and medical model of disability. By ‘patching up’ the system (Lindsay et al., 2020: 13) with the introduction – and uncritical celebration – of a Scheme that is compensatory, HE institutions perpetuate ‘discourses of misrecognition’ in disability politics while silencing the social justice and human rights dimensions of the process of change towards inclusion.

Widening participation in HE necessitates problematizing and challenging disabling and elitist discourses while recognising the nexus of disability, intersectionality, power and identity and its implications for creating disability-inclusive policies and practices in academia. Central to this process is the ‘voice’ of students and staff with hidden disabilities and their agency to be actively involved in decision-making processes (Goodley, 2000) regarding how they wish to be educationally and socially positioned, the nature of ‘inclusive’ change they envisage and the role they want to play in the process of change (Barton, 2001). This perspective relates to the development of participatory and emancipatory research agendas (Barton, 2005) informed by the insider perspectives of disabled students and academics, with the aim of understanding ‘the actual reality of participants, rather than that perceived by the researchers’ (Atkins and Duckworth, 2021: 123).

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. <https://hiddendisabilitiesstore.com/insights/post/back-to-campus-general>
2. <https://hiddendisabilitiesstore.com/insights/post/new-places-to-be-usa-march-220>
3. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dptac-position-on-non-visible-disabilities/dptac-position-statement-on-non-visible-disabilities>

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