

Disabled Graduate Students' Experiences and Vision of Change for Higher Education: A Participatory Action Research Study

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Abstract : Disabled students are underrepresented in graduate-level degree enrollment and completion. There is limited research on disabled students' progression during the pandemic. Disabled graduate students (DGS) face unique interpersonal and institutional barriers, yet, limited research explores these barriers, buffering facilitators, and aids to academic persistence. This study adopts an asset-based, embodied disability approach using the critical pedagogy theoretical framework instead of the deficit research approach. The Participatory Action Research (PAR) paradigm, the critical pedagogy theoretical framework, and emancipatory disability research share the same purpose -creating a socially just world through reciprocal learning. This study is one of few, if not the first, to center solely on DGS' lived understanding using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) epistemology. With a PAR paradigm, participants and investigators work as a research team democratically at every stage of the research process. PAR has individual and systemic outcomes. PAR lessens the researcher-participant power gap and elevates a marginalized community's knowledge as expertise for local change. PAR and critical pedagogy work toward enriching everyone involved with empowerment, civic engagement, knowledge proliferation, socio-cultural reflection, skills development, and active meaning-making. The PAR process unveils the tensions between disability and graduate school in policy and practice during the pandemic. Likewise, institutional and ideological tensions influence the PAR process. This project is recruiting 10 DGS until September through purposive and snowball sampling. DGS will collectively practice praxis during four monthly focus groups in the fall 2023 semester. Participant researchers can attend a focus group or an interview, both with field notes. September will be our orientation and first monthly meeting. It will include access needs check-ins, ice breakers, consent form review, a group agreement, PAR introduction, research ethics discussion, research goals, and potential research topics. October and November will be available for meetings for dialogues about lived experiences during our collaborative data collection. Our sessions can be semi-structured with "framing questions," which would be revised together. Field notes include observations that cannot be captured through audio. December will focus on local social action planning and dissemination. Finally, in January, there will be a post-study focus group for students' reflections on their experiences of PAR. Iterative analysis methods include transcribed audio, reflexivity, memos, thematic coding, analytic triangulation, and member checking. This research follows qualitative rigor and quality criteria: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and psychopolitical validity. Results include potential tension points, social action, individual outcomes, and recommendations for conducting PAR. Tension points have three components: dubious practices, contestable knowledge, and conflict. The dissemination of PAR recommendations will aid and encourage researchers to conduct future PAR projects with the disabled community. Identified stakeholders will be informed of DGS' insider knowledge to drive social sustainability.

Keywords : participatory action research, graduate school, disability, higher education

Conference Title : ICDD 2024 : International Conference on Disability and Diversity

Conference Location : San Francisco, United States

Conference Dates : November 04-05, 2024