Learning to be Accessible:

A Collaborative Exploration of Disability in the Classroom

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(Video of presentation with captions: https://youtu.be/l4mZa599pdQ)

Today's presentation is on Learning to be Accessible: A Collaborative Exploration of Disability in the Classroom. AJ and I are both very excited to be with you today and appreciate you coming. The need for accessibility is very apparent, especially in the classroom or school environment, as students' issues with inaccessibility can impact their ability to learn and be successful in the classroom as they try to reach their educational potential. This is a collaborative undertaking as we discuss how accessibility and disability impact students in the school environment and classroom. We're going to look at disability theory, which looks at disability as a social construct—a construct that we create and recreate in our social environments. We're also going to look at ethnographic examples as well as personal and professional experiences as they relate to accessibility and disability. And we're going to look at social learning and accessibility specifically. We're going to examine disability in the classroom, as I said previously, we're going to highlight creative solutions to issues of inaccessibility, and we're going to demonstrate the necessity of expanding collaborative research in

anthropology, as we hope to demonstrate the positive outcome from this collaboration between anthropology and school psychology.

Disability theory is gaining increased attention in anthropology and, as Susan mentioned, disability theory is rooted in the idea that disability isn't biological, although it commonly has bodily impacts. Rather, it's produced and reproduced through sociocultural understandings of what constitutes "normal" bodies and brains. With this in mind, we find that psychological anthropology and disability theory work very well together. They're both interested in mental health, subjectivity, and the production of knowledge. Studies like Karen Nakamura's *A Disability of the Soul* show how we can think of mental illnesses not only in terms of their biological and chemical underpinnings, but as disabilities that emerge in contrast to social and cultural frameworks of what it means to be able-minded. Through a disability theory lens, disability and subjectivity are highlighted to be not just internal or individual experiences, but shaped by social norms and cultural pressures that individuals themselves help to shape and reinforce over time. Finally, the very foundation of disability theory is rooted in an examination of the production of knowledge, or rather the production of standards that mark some bodies as "normate," and others as not. With attention to these aspects of disability theory, we'll be looking simultaneously at the sociocultural processes that produce disability and inaccessibility, and at the same time, to the subjectivities and resiliency of those with disabilities as they forge accessible and inclusive environments.

I'm now going to provide an overview of school psychology, specifically as it relates to the topics being addressed today. School psychologists combine knowledge of mental health, processes of learning, as well as behavior, in order to address students' needs academically, socially, behaviorally, emotionally— really addressing the whole child. This involves partnering with students, their families, school administrators, teachers, school counselors, school social workers, and other professionals within the school as the team really works to, again, address the needs of the whole child. School psychology is also uniquely intertwined with the issues of accessibility in the school. We work with these teams that I just described to create environments that are as accessible as possible to students regardless of their disability. This can be looked at from a legal standpoint, with laws such as IDEA—Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and other laws and supplements to that law that have been passed that require the education of students in public schools, regardless of disability. We also have requirements for FAPE, which stands for Free and Appropriate Public Education that is a legal requirement for all students, again, regardless of disability. And we are required to educate all students in the least restrictive environment, which means if we are going to separate a student from their non-disabled peers, for any portion of the school day in order to provide for their educational needs, we have to justify why this is necessary—why we can't provide the same services within the regular education classroom with their non-disabled peers. These are some of the legal requirements that govern special

education. Also within regular education, we have some students that receive accommodations and other services through 504 plans that can increase the accessibility of the school environment and the school curriculum to them. As well as Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and teaching students skills that go beyond reading, math, science, and social studies to teach skills such as conflict resolution and managing emotions, mental health management—how to ask for help when you have a mental health concern and things like that that are so important to students regardless, again, of disability.

So we'll now turn to some examples of both inaccessibility and accessibility in the classroom. And I'll be drawing from my ethnographic research on the everyday experiences of individuals with the genetic condition Turner Syndrome. Turner Syndrome is the result of a partially or entirely missing X chromosome, and can lead to a variety of impacts including short stature, infertility, heart problems, and early vision and hearing loss. And one important aspect of Turner Syndrome for many people with the condition is NVLD, or non-verbal learning disability, which impacts ability to read social cues and spatial learning. Finally, both Turner Syndrome and NVLD are often associated with difficulties in executive function and increased anxiety. So I want to look very briefly at two stories from some of my interlocutors in terms of some of the inaccessibility they faced and the ways in which they crafted solutions for themselves. One of my interlocutors, who I'll call Jessica, is in her 20s. She told me that she really struggled throughout school with managing the impacts that

Turner Syndrome had on her executive function. Her difficulties with planning and managing assignments lead to subpar grades, but her challenges, unfortunately, were not easily recognized or met by her teachers. Once in college, however, with the added pressure of living away from home for the first time, she developed her own Post-It note system to help her organize projects on both a short- and long-term basis, which she's now expanded to help her remember tasks to complete across her life more broadly. Another interlocutor, who I'll call Nancy, is in middle school. Her parents disclosed that her outbursts in class (the result, they realized, of her struggling to understand directions that weren't clearly delivered or written out and trying to get the attention of her teacher) only exacerbated her difficulties with making friends. Like Jessica, Nancy's parents found that there was only so much the school could do. After all, the school had already been quite flexible with allowing for additional absences since Nancy has many more doctor's appointments than other students. Nancy, however, with the help of her parents, found a solution that addressed both components of her experience of Turner Syndrome in the classroom. She proudly created and presented a presentation on Turner Syndrome for her class for a final project. And in doing so, she not only educated her teacher about some of the needs that were not being met, but she also taught her classmates some about the social anxieties that she faces. Furthermore, Nancy was able to draw from and showcase her mastery of verbal communication, which is one of the strengths that's commonly associated with NVLD and Turner Syndrome.

When forced to deal with an inaccessible school environment, both Jessica and Nancy were able to transform their difficulties into opportunities for improvement and the education of others that they've been able to apply not only in school but to their lives more broadly.

I want to share some personal and professional experiences as well, both as a school psychologist and as a woman with Turner Syndrome myself. I have definitely experienced issues with accessibility. Two examples that are most powerful to me in my life have been vision issues. When I was 17, I had some damage to my optic nerves related to my Turner Syndrome, and over my adult life my vision has deteriorated slightly and a few years ago, I just made a decision that it was no longer safe for me to drive given my issues with vision, especially peripheral vision became a real challenge. So I now use what my city offers, which is special transportation for persons with disabilities, which has been very helpful and a great solution to me, you know, getting places that I need to get to, most especially from home to work, and then back home is where I use it most frequently. However, it does come with, you know, its own set of challenges as well. In particular, my sense of agency during these rides on special transportation, and that I'm no longer in control. The driver is in control of the route we take. I don't have any control over what time they pick me up, or very little control—they might be running late, they might be early. You know, I really don't have a lot of control over that, though there is a schedule for the ride. But there's a lot of lack of control as well as control over whether I'm going

straight to work, for instance, or whether there'll be other stops, you know, along the way. So that has been both a solution and a challenge. Another issue with accessibility that I have personally experienced has been with my height. At four foot seven inches, there are a lot of things that are placed out of my reach, so to speak, in our society. Particularly, one example would be the top shelf at a grocery store. So one solution there, of course, is simply to ask for help—ask somebody who's taller to reach the item off the top shelf that I need or want. But, yeah, sometimes I get a little more creative than that. I've been known to climb on the bottom shelf at the grocery store so that I can reach the top shelf, which is a creative solution for sure. Anyway, so I also see students with issues with accessibility in my professional work as a school psychologist. This can be something as readily apparent as issues with access to the physical environment for a student in a wheelchair. If a doorway is not wide enough for their chair to fit through, or there's no ramp or elevator access to a part of the building they need to get to, then that becomes an issue that must be addressed in terms of their accessibility to the physical environment. Issues with accessibility also impact students, though, in ways that aren't always readily apparent or visible, such as a student with severe depression who has difficulty either coming to class or logging on in the remote environment we've been in recently with the pandemic. Many students are still learning from home, but sometimes severe depression or anxiety can even impact their ability to log onto their computer. And once they are in class, it impacts their ability to pay attention and access the learning that's

being offered in that class. So issues with inaccessibility are definitely an important consideration in terms of student success in the school environment.

As we investigate accessibility in anthropology, disability theory helps us recognize that inaccessible environments, language, and frameworks are born from the social production and reinforcement of disability. In collaboration with applied disciplines like school psychology, we can better contextualize these processes with real-world applications and solutions. Together, these approaches help bolster psychological anthropological understandings of the relationship between the internal and external factors that shape subjectivities, mental health, and—following the renewed commitment of the SPA—experiences of injustice. By aligning with the expertise of school psychology, we can consider school systems as revealing microcosms where individuals learn societal expectations that shape disability, and also as places where individuals can craft inclusive solutions. This dual factor aligns with what disability activists and psychological anthropologists have long recognized: that individuals display resilience and creativity in response to societal obstacles. As we recommit to a more collaborative discipline, it's critical we not only recognize our role and our discipline's role in injustice, but also provide space for our interlocutors to demonstrate how they forge their subjectivities through and despite these various kinds of inaccessibility and discrimination. Collaborating with our participants, as well as collaborating across disciplines and professions, lends insight into these processes at the same time that the collaborations themselves offer new

opportunities for access to education and for the chance to make a positive difference. This presentation, as we've mentioned, was born out of a collaboration between researcher and participant, therefore demonstrating the very thing that we seek to argue: that to shape a more ethical discipline, we should bring our interlocutors more fully into the conversation and learn from both their personal and professional expertise.

So Susan and I want to thank you again for joining us and listening to our presentation. I want to thank the NSF for providing funding for my research, and our contact information is listed in case you want to get in touch.