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‘The personal is political’! Considering and exploring the attitudes and intentions that form and frame our ‘partnering up’ with and for disability rights in higher education

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This poetic conversation presents a series of individual and linked reflections on our ‘attitudes and intentions’ as students and tutors in higher education ‘partnering up’ for social justice and disability rights. We are a collaboration of academics (Yota and Suanne) with students of Education (Laura, Mette, Emma, Damaris, Toby, Katherine, Amandine, Jack and Manoor) from three HEIs in England, United Kingdom (UK) (University of Plymouth, University of Reading and University of Nottingham) who each live with disability. We have chosen not to define any individual position. We collectively hold a shared perspective and belief in the social model of disability, where inequality is created by and exists due to a dominant hegemonic, systemic, and cultural position on what is normal and thus valued and what is not and thus oppressed, excluded, overlooked. Our world can and must do better. We, students, and tutors—learners together—have worked and responded in partnership over the past four years in the following ways:

- raising Disability awareness through co-creating a joint student-staff panel event on lived experiences for Disability History month;
- celebrating diversity in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) by contributing to the Raspberry Pi Culturally relevant and responsive Pedagogies in Computing video clip;
- challenging perceptions about disability and professional identity at a local level through personal activism (as course representatives and pre-service teachers) and joint training activities;
- co-leading university-based training events around equality issues, leadership development and culture change;
- developing and conducting a pilot project in England on undergraduate and postgraduate disabled students’ education experiences during the pandemic;
- organising, and speaking at an international webinar about equality and inclusive education for disabled students in higher education (HE): Matters of ‘access’ and

‘disability’: exploring and affecting systemic and cultural change in and for Higher Education’;

- working with the House of Lords UK government, contributing to research and subsequently developments to national UK education policy on the UK Disabled Student Allowance—processes and procedures;
- speaking together at a national panel rolling out the findings of Disabled Students UK’s seminal report for the HE sector on inclusive provision for disabled students: *Going Back is Not a Choice*;
- speaking together at the first UK Higher Education Knowledge Exchange conference, on the importance of partnership with schools and our wider communities when working for disability and Special Educational Needs equality in education and society; and
- creating changes to our degree curriculum as informed by student critical feedback, knowledge and perspective.

This piece reflects on the attitudes and intentions that resulted in these partnerships, alongside commentary on the impact they have had. Our partnerships were at times long-term and extensive and helped shape personal identity (in the case of Katherine, Amandine, Suanne and Jack) and identity in professional practice (in the case of Emma, Damaris, Mahnoor and Yota) and raise wider awareness in spaces of work and study (in the case of Toby) and further activism (in the cases of Laura and Mette). The three principles of respect, reciprocity and responsibility (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014) were cornerstones of our collaborative ventures. We co-created meaning from our experiences and actions as a result. In the process, we redefined some of the traditional expectations of power relationships between tutors and students and deepened our understanding about the significance of such partnerships. The dialogue was not always easy, but it was necessary for the unconscious to become conscious.

We are believers in and practitioners of critical pedagogy, which we locate in the work of Paulo Freire (Giroux, 2010), where issues of power and politics in terms of the role of teacher, learner, the education system, and wider society are acknowledged, de-constructed and redefined so that education and learning can be re-established as a dialectical process, a two-way learning in partnership, the student as tutor and the tutor as student. We hold at our core that education is a collective endeavour, without which learning, self and community growth does not happen. Education is thus a partnership which works to challenge power, systemic oppression and established frames of reference, and representation in education is an essential component of our, the authors’, collective attitude and intent. So too is our belief about the need for change, in particular a radical systemic and cultural change for social justice in relation to the intersection of ‘disability’.

For us as authors, our personal identities alongside our externally positioned identities overlap, contradict, conjoin and spin out. We find ourselves regularly positioned as ‘other and challenging’ or, as in the view of Ahmed (2012), pushing against the dominant flow. And so, we combine energies by coming together and coming out as partners for change; in

solidarity we hold and live the renowned feminist position, “*The personal is political*” (hooks, 1981; Mang Ling Lee, 2007). That is core and central to our shared attitudes and beliefs. Our individual experiences, at times kept private out of choice or need, have through partnership been given space and shared. From this exchange, transformation has happened for each of us, individually, but also all of us, collectively.

Thus, our attitudes and intentions create partnerships for collective action and change. The rationale for and impact of our partnership projects, as listed above, are reflected in the feminist perspectives and critical pedagogic positions of Cates, Madigan, & Reitenauer (2018) and Mercer-Mapstone & Mercer (2018). We believe it is through collective endeavour, partnership and combined energy that the status quo will be changed and a previously isolated oppressed self, a failing system of education and unequal society will be transformed. Our intentions are reflected in the words of Hanisch (1969): ‘*Collective action for a collective solution*’.

And so... we invite you to read our words—be challenged, feel discomfort, find connection, pain and humour, be a partner, be an ally and always see the political.

Prologue

A collection of voices about cooperation, collaboration, alliance, partnership, and comradeship is

a collection of voices about the self and the shared, which becomes....

a collection of voices about identity, growth, change:

For those of us who are and are not,

whilst embracing and pushing away the identity of ‘disability’,

we hold a variety of attitudes and intentions in our drivers and choices of ‘partnering up’ in educator-to-educator partnership.

We see identity, role and place in education and society through a much richer and complex lens than those not afforded the profound experience of disability

We may draw closer and yet at the same time away—

Never had I deeply questioned the ‘why’...

Perhaps I assumed an obvious ‘truth’

In working together, as partners on a pedagogic project, as the disabled, as the ally, as the committed thinker for change we all hold the same intent... don’t we?

That our attitudes or intentions are diverse

To have my views and self-experience as a disabled academic/student validated and made real... is that an intention of this partnership?

As limited perspectives and lack of understanding fosters insecurity and fear, self-doubt can become loud

Is my view that partnership validates and secures?

It was for learning, education and the power to make change happen that I said yes

I learned, we learned, you taught me ... change happened.

Suanne Gibson

A partnership by any other name will feel so powerful

As years go by, I find myself placing the rights of the people who used their power to give my voice space centre stage. Their allyship, very often unnoticed, an expression of trust and kindness, that I seek to honour at the heart of my work. I have strived to address the marginalisation so many of us face, but could not do it if it were not for the acceptance I've been gifted in most difficult situations.

Laura Chapman

Prefigurativism is embodying the world we want to see.
Our partnership embodies collaboration, compassion, and the valuing of lived experience.
We are building a new world

Bring me in, pay for my services, centre my lived experience, but do not put me on a pedestal.

There are many things I know, but my thoughts need challenging too.
I will not break or rage if you take a wrong step.

How can I achieve change in academia
if I do not understand the challenges and drives of the academic?

Mette Westander

Collaboration and support to raise you up, banish self-doubt and illuminate a path that may seem too dark to walk alone.

Emma Pullen

The teacher training process is unique because, as a student themselves, a trainee teacher must teach and be taught.

They must master and look to the masters.

It helps when the masters are women.

As a trainee computer science teacher and a woman, I have seen the battles that I myself and colleagues have faced to earn a spot among the subject specialists.

A strong partnership with a likeminded tutor has helped me to realise my worth and has given me confidence in my abilities.

It is these partnerships and connections that make the journey truly worthwhile.

To all the women on this journey with me, **thank you** for lighting my way and for this sisterhood.

Damaris Landers

With a big focus on shifting from disability being visible only, it is very important to give awareness to hidden disabilities.

The struggle of seeming 'ok and healthy' on the outside is so important for people to know and understand;

this was the main reason why I participated in the Disability Awareness event.

It's nice to know that you're not alone in your journey throughout the hard times and hearing other people's stories that are so different

- yet so similar- to your own.

Being part of this partnership has provoked the need for change

... and ignited an inner flame for bringing my story to light - in hope to help others do the same.

Toby Clark

Transformations through partnerships: self-awareness, personal development and becoming agents of change

You will know me by my flamboyant dress style, my red lipstick, my wide smile but you will not see my impairment. I learnt to hide it well and deflect the gaze from it. I don't have a stick, wheelchair or assistive tech so some do wonder, how is she Disabled? Is I-abling [labelling] enabling? For whom and how?

I went through many states of Being, reflecting on my disability and realised that it is the interdependencies that helped my independence and learnt in the words of AJ Withers that the difference with non-disabled people is that they *"have had their dependencies normalized."*

It is those interdependencies that make me stronger to challenge able-bodied hierarchies and advocate for co-creating change. A change that has to be intersectional! Through partnerships, alliances, advocacy we fight in our collective ways misrepresentations of Disability and misinterpretation of needs; we fight the hurt that ableism causes and empower ourselves to disrupt and resist dominant narratives and be ourselves.

We teach each other strategies for sharing our voices, for equity, for access and break down barriers between the invisible and the imagined in academia and the world beyond.

Yota Dimitriadi

My label weighs heavily on my shoulder, so I tuck it behind me, hoping nobody sees.

Deep, unsettling discomfort in the misheard, misinformed, and misunderstood.

Until a caring voice speaks soft and strong, words that creep inwards to a quiet flickering glow

And through truly seeing, believing, and trusting, the flame can burn bright and resilient. There is power in partnership. In finding the glow. In dancing with the flames.

Let's set the sky alight.

Katherine Gulliver

There is power in labels. How they are viewed by your academic self is significantly more valuable and important than how they are often looked upon by the public. Be proud, because while there is power in the label, there is also power in alternative perspectives.

Amandine Cheney

The Asperger's in me can only be unlocked by my golden key. Scared of judgement and discrimination. Empowered by confidence and liberation. A partnership built on trust and understanding earns you the right to see my true identity: the Asperger's in me.

Jack Smith

The status of our mental health doesn't define us
We may seem little, but we are a lot
We are on this journey to join together and to take our power back
This shadow won't be glooming over us forever
As this is our liberating endeavour

Mahnoor Awan

Epilogue

Together, with respect, reciprocity and responsibility, we are moving forward the Disability Rights agenda at our places of work, study and beyond through collaborative discussions, events, policy reform, raising questions, perceptions and expecting to be listened to.

And now you hold a collection of thoughts about cooperation, collaboration, alliance, partnership, comradeship, which become
a collection of thoughts about the self and the shared and ...
about y/our identity, growth, change, impact....

What will you and your partnerships do next?

What new attitudes and intentions will frame and inform your future collaborations?

Nothing about us without us—in solidarity we join you!

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