Exploring Adolescents’ Understandings of Disability in a Blended Environment of Interactions

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Abstract: Understanding how disability is socially constructed is important for establishing inclusive schools, since the ways in which educators and non-disabled nondisabled students understand disability affect their actions towards disabled students. As social interaction today is very often an interplay between online and offline communication activities, this study aimed to explore how young adolescents in Cyprus construct the concept of disability in a blended environment of interactions. A qualitative research approach was adopted involving focus groups with 18 adolescents, online and face to face semi-structured individual interviews, participant observation on a Facebook group set up for the purposes of the study, and the first author’s reflective diary. A combination of thematic analysis, critical discourse analysis and analytic elements from the field of visual semiotics were used for data analysis. Data analysis indicated that adolescents understand disability mostly through medical and charity models. Based on the data, these understandings arise from the construction of disabled people’s multimodal ‘invisibility/absence’, in both online and offline contexts of adolescents’ everyday reality. Suggestions for further research in disability constructions in blended environments, and implications for the field of inclusive education concerning teachers and pre-service teachers’ educational practice are discussed.

Keywords: understandings; social construction; disability; blended environment; inclusive education; Cyprus; adolescents

1. Introduction

Moscovici, the founder of social representations theory stated: ‘a social representation is not a quiet thing’ [1] in an attempt to emphasise that the way a specific concept is constructed communicates specific ideological messages. Perceiving disability as a social construction is associated with people’s perceptions about what is considered as ‘normal’ within specific socio-historical-economic contexts. For example, the term ‘special needs’ has been linked to the notion of disabled students having ‘different’ vs ‘normal’ needs [2]. However different needs from whom? The ways in which the concept of ‘normal’ is defined has been linked to the notion of disabled students having ‘different’ vs ‘normal’ needs [2].

Regarding economic factors, an example is the relation between Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) diagnosis and ADHD treatment. Studies have demonstrated
that ADHD is profitable for the pharmaceutical industry, especially with regard to the production of Ritalin [4,5]. Thus, the diagnosis of students as students with ADHD, and their treatment, is economically beneficial for the pharmaceutical industry. This is problematic, regarding even the existence of ADHD as a condition [6,7]. Discussing the controversies which surround ADHD is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to bear in mind that sometimes the labelling of a child as ‘a student with ADHD’ (i.e., a non-normal child) is not isolated from economic benefits; on the contrary, it serves economic interests.

The above indicate that societal norms and economic forces play a catalytic role in defining what is considered as disability, as the social model of disability suggests. Disability models (medical, charity, social model, which are further explained in the theoretical background) constitute specific, distinct viewpoints about how disability is conceptualised. From the perspective of the medical model, society does not have a responsibility to adapt to meet disabled people’s needs, but people have to adapt to society [8]. The charity model views disabled people as fragile and non-autonomous, requiring pity in the form of charity from the state and non-disabled individuals [9]. Hence, contrary to the social model, the medical and the charity model perceive disability as an individual’s problem without considering the impact of economic and social structures [10].

In turn, this conceptualisation is extended to the educational arena; students’ difficulties are not located within the wider socio-economic context [2], leading to specific perceptions about disabled students.

These perceptions become apparent through action [11]. In the school classroom, if a disabled student is included or excluded depends mainly on teachers’ and peers’ constructions of disability and, consequently, the attitudes and actions emerging from these constructions. Undoubtedly, other factors such as legislation and policies are equally important, as they impact on the ways in which disability is constructed by teachers and peers. For instance, how teachers perceive disability can affect their teaching practices towards disabled students [12–14]. Furthermore, studies in Cyprus and the UK demonstrate that non-disabled students tend to construct disabled peers as ‘others’, which can result in their marginalisation and segregation [15–17]. Such constructions are also linked to negative attitudes towards disabled people [3]. Negative attitudes are emphasised in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as a barrier to inclusion: as stated in the Advocacy Toolkit of the UNCDPR (p.5) ‘the societal barriers—such as physical obstacles and negative attitudes—confronting persons with disabilities as the main obstacles to the full enjoyment of human rights’.

Therefore, considering that understanding how disability is socially constructed is important in realising inclusive schooling [3,18], research in different communicative environments such as face to face contexts [16,19], online contexts [20,21] and through different ‘means’ such as curricula [22–24], policy and legislation [3,18,25] and media [26,27] has taken place to explore those constructions and their manifestations.

Yet, constructions of disability, particularly adolescents’ understandings of disability, have not been adequately researched in blended environments, i.e., spaces of discussion and interaction created at the intersection of online-offline settings. Although there are studies that have used online and face to face interviews to explore how disability is constructed, these were limited only to teachers’ perspectives [28].

As with all social actors, adolescents’ constructions also ‘have their origin not in the person’s private experience, but in the discursive culture that those people inhabit’ [29]. Adolescents’ culture in contemporary society involves a web of social interactions in the environment of social media. Importantly, adolescents’ engagement with social media emerges in the blend of face to face and online interaction. In this regard, the dichotomy between the ‘real’ and the ‘virtual’ word is rejected as nowadays technology cannot be divorced from reality [30,31].

Taking into consideration the blend of online-offline interactions in young people’s everyday communicative practices, it was important to research young adolescents’ conceptualizations of disability through this prism. To this end, the aim of this paper is to
explore adolescents’ conceptualisations of disability in a blended environment which was particularly designed for the purposes of the study. The paper first discusses the theoretical background underpinning the study, then the methodology and main findings, and finally, the study’s implications for teaching and research in the field of inclusive education.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Social Constructions of Disability and the Notion of Discourse

Social construction refers to how people’s knowledge and understanding of a specific concept has emerged through social interaction, which is influenced by a wide range of intersecting economic, social, and cultural factors. Gallagher [2] argues that the concept of disability is always related to the context, ‘an interpretation of a particular person’s differences as perceived by others through a normative framework’ (para. 10). Since conceptualization of disability is context-dependent, it is affected by different contexts and different social interactions that emerge within these contexts.

In addition, very often, research investigating how disabilities are constructed and understood, involves analyses of discourses, making the concept of discourse another significant element of the theoretical framework of this study. Discourse cannot be defined in a straightforward way as it constitutes a non-concrete notion. For the purposes of this study, the concept of discourse is used to illustrate the specific historical, social and institutional structures/meanings [32] that people provide to the notion of disability through the different means that they use (such as images, stories, metaphors, stories, statements, terms) [29] as they interact in blended environments. It seems apposite at this point to draw attention to the ‘othering’ discourse as it is inextricably linked with disability constructions.

The ‘Other’ can be defined as someone who is not accepted for who s/he is, does not conform to society’s ideals regarding beauty, health, education, and is stigmatised and marginalized [33,34]. Arguably, the ‘Other’ is the ‘different’ person who diverges from society’s standards regarding what is perceived as ‘normal’ [35]. In the case of disability, othering discourses are usually interwoven with the medical and the charity models of disability.

According to the medical model, disabled people are ‘problematic’, and to conform to mainstream society, disability needs to be ‘cured’ [26]. The charity model evolved from the medical model of disability, where the medical model deficit leads to the view of disability as a tragedy that ‘must be tempered or erased by generous giving’ [36]. Through the charity model, disabled people are perceived as victims who need nondisabled people’s pity, sympathy, and help in the form of charity [37]. In sharp contrast, according to the social model of disability, disability cannot be defined irrespectively of the historical, social, political and economic context of disabled people [38] (p. 3). The social model of disability or the ‘social oppression theory’ [39] challenged the traditional medical model or the ‘personal tragedy model’ (ibid) drastically. Within the perspective of the social model, understanding disability becomes synonymous with understanding that social barriers, and not individual impairments, block disabled people’s way in participating fully in society [38]. Finally, the human rights model underlines the inextricable relation of the social model with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (henceforth UNCRPD) [40].

Each of these perspectives has a different premise when it comes to the role of education. For instance, the medical model tends to be related to special education and integration, while the social model seems to be related to inclusive education [41]. In this article, special education is used as defined by Kearney [42] and refers to the segregation of disabled students from their peers in mainstream schools [43]. Integration refers to the modification of schools or other institutions in order to adapt to students’ needs; in other words, how to accommodate disabled students’ needs in existing forms of schooling [44]. Integration, therefore, is not concerned with the quality of students’ experiences in mainstream schools [45], as disabled students are placed in mainstream schools without any radical changes. This gave rise to the term ‘maindumping’ [46] that reflects exactly the practice of placing (dumping) disabled students in unprepared mainstream schools. In
other words, special education and integration perceive disabled children’s education as a separate educational setting focusing only on disabled children’s needs and not as an educational setting that provides quality education to all children. Any critical discussion in the article is based on the above interpretation of not only the concepts but the type of education provided according to these, and based on relevant local research [17,22,47].

There are many definitions of the term inclusive education [3]. It has been described as a social movement against exclusionary practices within the education realm [48,49]. In this paper we adopt the notion of inclusive education as a human rights approach which aligns to article 24 of UNCRPD. ‘States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realising this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning’. By adopting this approach, it is recognised that excluding practices constitute a violation of students’ human rights and that ‘differences’ in the classroom do not create barriers, but opportunities to include all students [3].

Slee (2004 cited in [50]) argues that ‘The idea of inclusion has travelled so much that it has become jet-lagged’. What should be clarified is that to avoid getting ‘jet-lagged’, it is essential when writing about and discussing inclusive education to take into consideration the unique historical socio-cultural-economic context of each country. Since this study took place in Cyprus, the next section sheds light on research related to disability constructions in the Cypriot context.

2.2. Disability Constructions as a Barrier to Inclusive Schooling: The Case of Cyprus

In order to capture the main areas identified in the literature as important indicators of disability constructions in Cyprus, the following paragraphs begin by presenting Radiomarathon, which is the biggest fundraising event for disabled people in Cyprus, and moving to other areas such as how disability is constructed in the national curriculum, in the main policy documents for the education of children with disabilities and in virtual environments, though literature on the latter is very scarce.

2.2.1. Radiomarathon

The Radiomarathon has taken place in Cyprus once a year since 1990, organised by a radio station and a national bank. For the organisation of this event, massive amounts of money are invested, and the dominant message communicated is that disabled children need non-disabled people’s pity, sympathy, and help in the form of financial assistance. Radiomarathon constitutes an integral part of children’s school lives in Cyprus from a young age. According to Symeonidou and Phtiaka’s research [47], the majority of teachers who participated in their study support the Radiomarathon by encouraging non-disabled children to provide financial assistance to disabled children. This approach towards Radiomarathon depicts the charity model of disability [51], not a human rights discourse that children can engage with. Disabled activists and scholars in the field have attempted to challenge the messages manifested through the Radiomarathon (Prokopiou 2001; Phtiaka 1999; Symeonidou 2005b cited in [51]). Nevertheless, despite the criticism about the reproduction of disability stereotypes through schools’ and other parties’ actions concerning Radiomarathon, the idea of a charitable act towards disabled people still dominates the Cypriot discursive arena. For instance, in the Radiomarathon of 2016, First Lady Mrs Andri Anastasiades noted that, ‘We always rely on the great sensitivity, the humanity and the kindness that our people demonstrate to those who need us’ and that ‘We hope that this year’s Radiomarathon will amass even more funds to meet more requests and needs.’ Ironically, the motto of the event that took place in 2016 was ‘I have the right’, reflecting the discordance between theory and practice in relation to inclusion.

2.2.2. Curriculum

Symeonidou and Mavrou’s [22] research focused on the language used in the Cypriot curriculum to explore how disabled students are represented. According to their findings,
disabled students are constructed as ‘children with special needs’ or ‘disabled children’, though it is important to note that the first term was most frequently used. Other terms used synonymously with ‘children with special needs’ included ‘children with particularities’ and ‘people with special abilities’ (terms related to the medical and the charity model of disability), communicating to teachers that disabled children have different, ‘other’, ‘special’ needs from their non-disabled peers. As a result, according to the same researchers, the New National Curriculum (NNC) communicates that ‘teachers are not expected to do anything in particular in order to accommodate disabled children in their teaching’ [22] (p. 312).

Another study by Mavrou and Symeonidou [24] illustrates that the NNC fails to respond to the plea for inclusive education regarding designing a curriculum for all students, but frequently differentiation is perceived as a separate planning activity for disabled students since they are considered students with special needs. Legislation and policies operate similarly.

2.2.3. Legislation and Policies

After sharp criticisms by UNESCO of Cyprus’ education system, an organised effort began to achieve the enactment of the 1999 Special Education Law [52], also called the Education Act for the Education of Children with Special Needs. This law has legitimised a two-track system. It provides disabled students with the following options: (1) inclusion in a mainstream school; (2) a special unit within a mainstream school; (3) a special school or (4) home-schooling. Apparently, the two last options constitute completely segregated settings: special schools and probably home education contrast with the rhetoric of inclusive education.

With regard to the first two options, it is important to consider that disabled students receive individualised instruction in the special unit in a separated class for a small number of students with disabilities within the mainstream school setting [15]. This form of provision is related to disabled students ‘with specific syndromes such as autism and Down’s syndrome, as well as those with complex needs (such as) brain disorders and severe mental delay’ [53] (p. 218). On the other hand, students with moderate learning difficulties attend school with their peers in mainstream classrooms but they are frequently isolated from their non-disabled peers. The aetiology that lies beneath their isolation is that they have to receive individualised learning support, which is provided by a special support teacher in a resource room [54].

Cyprus has signed the UNCRPD and, in 2011, ratified it through the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Related Issues (Ratification) Law of 2011, L. 8 (III)/2011. Article 24 of UNCRPD stresses equal opportunities for the education of disabled students. However, the way that is communicated through the Cypriot legislation uses individualistic terminology such as ‘special needs terminology, establishment, and functioning of special schools’ despite its supposedly inclusive discourse and is presented as ‘article 24’ [25]. It mirrors, therefore, a medical model construction, and not the human rights model underpinning the original Article 24 in the UNCRPD. The UN Committee [55] has criticized the implementation of article 24 (education) in the Cypriot context.

Due to this criticism and recommendations of the Committee, consultations between the Cypriot government and other state services regarding inclusive education laws commenced in January 2018 and continue until today. Currently, a provisional law has been drafted, but it was rejected by the organisations of parents of disabled children and by the academic community. The rationale underlying its rejection is that despite the inclusive rhetoric used in the preamble of the law, the specific articles included in the law seem to mirror the philosophy of segregating children with disabilities, consistent with the previous legislation. Regarding the previous legislation, Liasidou [56] explored the ways in which official legislative documents in the Cypriot context construct asymmetrical power relations and disabled children. She pointed out that the vocabulary used in the previous legislation ‘implies children’s inability to overcome their biological and pathological deficiencies despite the facilities provided for them’ [56] (p. 490).
2.2.4. Virtual Settings

Though virtual settings are currently considered important spaces for exploring people’s understandings of disability, to our knowledge only one study has taken place in Cyprus in relation to disability constructions and virtual settings. Theodorou and Mavrou’s study [21] focused on the ways that disability is constructed in virtual settings by examining Greek-Cypriot online news media articles and online readers’ posts in response to these articles. According to their findings, adults’ understandings of disability within these settings reproduced traditional models of disability, with the charity model prevailing in readers’ narratives. However, there were some instances were readers adopted a human rights model towards disability.

3. Methodology

Research on disability conceptualisations in Cyprus, has largely focused on print and online documents analysis, or face to face environments. Nevertheless, as mentioned in the introduction of this paper, contemporary society is characterised by interactions taking place in blended environments. Therefore, we aimed to explore how adolescents conceptualise disability in a blended environment created for the purposes of this study. The research questions that guided this study were:

1) How are adolescents’ conceptualizations of disability linked to the most used and established models of disability (medical, charity, social, human rights model) in a blended environment?
2) Which types of disability discourses (e.g., othering, marginalisation, inclusion) are prevalent in adolescents’ conceptualizations of disability in a blended environment?

3.1. Research Design

In order to answer these research questions, a qualitative research approach was adopted. Drawing on the importance of adolescents’ interactions in blended environments, circumstance of interaction in a blended form were created specifically for the purposes of this study to explore adolescents’ understandings of disability within those, thereafter termed the ‘blended environment’. The design of this environment was facilitated and monitored by the first author and involved opportunities for participants to interact and discuss disability-related issues in face-to-face meetings and online discussions. More specifically, it consisted of face-to-face focus groups, and a closed Facebook group, where further discussions took place through posts. Focus groups provided the baseline for the discussions that took place on social media and vice-versa, with online discussions being used as a basis during the subsequent focus groups (Table 1). Other data collection methods included online and face to face semi-structured individual interviews and a researcher’s (first author’s) reflective diary. Interview protocols were prepared for most of the focus group meetings. The questions aimed at facilitating discussion regarding disability among the participants. The protocols were semi-structured; thus, the questions were open to modification depending on the participants’ answers. The semi-structured interview protocols were developed in the following way. With regards to the first meeting with the focus groups the authors drew on the work of Beckett, Florian and Baglieri [16,57,58] and formed a semi-structured interview protocol. Beckett [16] (p. 8) used open questions such as ‘What does the word disability mean?’ and ‘Do you think disabled grown-ups have jobs?’ Based on the above, the following questions were developed, which aimed at exploring adolescents’ initial views regarding disability:

a. What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word ‘disability’?
b. How do you think that other people, such as your teachers, peers and/or parents, think about disability?
c. Do you speak about disability with your friends/parents/teachers?
d. How do you feel about disability?
e. How do you think your friends, parents, teachers feel about disability?
f. Do you think that disabled grown-ups have jobs? Why yes/no?
| Phase | Timeline | Aim of Phase                                                                 | How the Aims were Achieved (Data Collection Methods) |
|-------|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| 1st   | December 2015 | To explore adolescents' conceptualizations of disability during face-to-face interactions | Meeting 1  
- Focus group A  
- Focus group B  
- Researcher’s reflective diary |
| 2nd   | December 2015–January 2016 | To explore adolescents' conceptualizations of disability during online interactions on a Facebook group | - Participant observation on Facebook (notes)  
- Researcher’s reflective diary |
| 3rd   | January 2016 | To explore adolescents' conceptualizations of disability in the blend of face to face and online interactions by discussing critical incidents* that have taken place on the Facebook group and/or in the previous focus group  
*(please note: this paper focuses only on adolescents’ understandings of disability in the blended environment. Findings referring to critical incidents are going to be discussed elsewhere). | Meeting 2  
- Focus group A  
- Focus group B  
- Researcher’s reflective diary |
| 4th   | January 2016–March 2016 | To explore adolescents' conceptualizations of disability during online interactions on Facebook group | - Participant observation on Facebook (notes)  
- Online individual interviews  
- Researcher’s reflective diary |
| 5th   | April 2016 | To explore adolescents' conceptualizations of disability in the blend of face to face and online interactions | Meeting 3  
- Focus group A  
- Focus group B  
- Participant observation on Facebook (notes)  
- Researcher’s reflective diary |
| 6th   | May 2016–June 2016 | To explore adolescents' conceptualizations of disability and reflections on the study in the blend of face to face and online interactions | Meeting 4  
- Focus group A  
- Focus group B  
- Participant observation on Facebook (notes)  
- Face-to-face individual interviews  
- Researcher’s reflective diary |

* (please note: this paper focuses only on adolescents’ understandings of disability in the blended environment. Findings referring to critical incidents are going to be discussed elsewhere).
With regard to the third and fourth meeting with focus groups, the semi-structured interview protocol included questions related to critical events identified on Facebook and/or during the previous focus group meetings. The research was conducted between December 2015 and June 2016, and was divided into six phases, each of which is presented in Table 1 alongside with the aims of each phase and the data collection methods. Further details on the methodological and analytical framework approaches of this study will be reported elsewhere in a publication dedicated to methodology.

A purposive sampling technique was used. Participants were selected through personal contacts. The first author came into contact with her own students and parents from private tutoring and then with other teachers working in mainstream schools, teachers having students in private tutoring, and informed them about the scope of the research as well as the data collection methods, which included focus groups and digital research (Facebook group). She gave them information sheets to transfer the information to all possible participants and their parents. Adolescents who expressed their interest in participating in the study also contacted friends and informed them about the study. Attempts were made to include both disabled and non-disabled adolescents in the Focus Groups and Facebook Group, as having an inclusive group of adolescents could contribute to gaining a deeper understanding of how adolescents conceptualize disability. Nevertheless, the majority of people that the first author came in contact with for recruiting disabled adolescents claimed that disabled adolescents do not tend to use Facebook. Fourteen girls and four boys aged 14–16, participated in the study. They were divided into two groups (Group A and B) based on familiarity, as the participants felt more comfortable being with their friends. It is worth noting that, coincidentally, Group A included participants with disabled relatives.

3.2. Ethical Issues

The research was carried out with due regard to the authors’ university regulations on ethics (European University’s Research Regulation/Policy-Ethics). An information sheet and consent forms about the research were given to parents and adolescents. The information sheet also included clarifications regarding the Facebook group (all the participants already had Facebook accounts). It was emphasised that online discussions would be kept confidential, shared only with the main author and the members of the group. The group would be kept closed to its members only and would be deleted after the end of the study. It was explained to the adolescents that, despite the privacy of the Facebook group, all discussions and posts remain on Facebook, according to Facebook’s regulations about data use policy. Adolescents were informed that according to Facebook closed group privacy settings, anyone can see the group’s name, the members of the group, the group description and the group’s tags, but stories and posts within the group can only be viewed by the members of the group. The abovementioned information and clarifications were explained again during the first meeting with the participants.

During the process of informing participants about the research study, another crucial matter that had to be taken into account was that of placing the adolescents in the position of ‘expert’ and asking for their help [59]. To achieve this, the first author explained to the adolescents that, despite the fact that she already had some knowledge on disability issues, she is not an expert in adolescents’ perceptions about disability, and that is why the study was carried out.

3.3. Analysis

The data collected involved multimodal data (i.e., data which includes verbal and non-verbal communication such as language, pictures, photos, drawings, and videos) through participants’ online and face to face interactions. Having different types of data required combining different methods of analysis and analytical frameworks. These methods involved thematic analysis [60] and critical discourse analysis (CDA). Concerning discourse analysis, Fairclough’s framework of CDA [61] was enhanced with three of Gee’s seven-building tasks [62,63] for discourse analysis, namely significance, relationships,
politics. Three tasks were chosen as they are considered strongly related to the study’s aims as follows:

With regard to significance, it was essential to identify what participants considered as significant concerning disability; with regard to relationships, it was vital to examine if relationships of ‘otherness’ were constructed through the adolescents’ interactions. With regard to politics, it was crucial to examine what the adolescents’ considered as ‘normal’, ‘appropriate’ and so on, which is in line with the theoretical background of this paper.

The analysis focused only on discursive data, while analysis of multimodal data per se was not possible at the time. However, students’ interpretations of multimodal data were analysed, and thus elements from the field of visual semiotics [64,65] where integrated in the analytical framework. Development of the combined analytical framework will be reported elsewhere.

Atlas.ti was used for analysing the data. The software was helpful in assisting the researchers to observe which codes could be applied to the same or overlapping data segments. Three major axes emerged from the thematic analysis of the data: (1) adolescents’ traditional understandings of disability in a blended environment; (2) adolescents challenging traditional understandings of disability in a blended environment; (3) adolescents’ potential of shifting away from traditional understandings of disability in a blended environment. This paper focuses on the first axis of the data, since before presenting and discussing the other two axes, is important to gain an insight into what kind of understandings emerged in the blended environment of the study.

After the thematic analysis, the data were analysed (and presented in the next section) in the following way. Adolescents’ language, in terms of vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and evidentialities, which constitutes the first dimension of Fairclough’s analytical framework description—what the language used looks like—is presented and discussed. Each point of the analysis is in bold/italics. Additionally, in cases where the extracts are long, the sentences related to description are underlined to help the reader identifying students’ vocabulary.

Then, the analysis proceeds to the second dimension of the analytical framework, interpretation—what the use of these terms and phrases means. This part of the analysis discusses further the adolescents’ understandings connecting them with the theoretical background in relation to disability constructions. The second dimension of the analysis involves paying attention to significance, relationships, and politics.

The third dimension of the analysis, explanation—why it is that way—delves further into an effort to explain why these particular understandings are constructed by considering the socio-cultural context of Cyprus.

4. Findings

4.1. Adolescents’ Traditional Understandings of Disability in a Blended Environment

Adolescents’ traditional understandings of disability involve the following sub thematic categories: (1) understanding disability as ‘incompetence’, (2) understanding disability as ‘pitifulness’ (3) understanding disability as ‘invisibility’.

4.1.1. Understanding Disability as Incompetence

This understanding of disability involved perceiving disabled people as facing deficits and being unable to cope with everyday life due to their disability; a perception communicated through medicalisation of disability by placing emphasis on the deficit [66]. During the first meetings of the focus groups, participants were invited to reflect on the first thing that comes to their mind when they hear the word ‘disability’ (anapiria in Greek). Each participant expressed their opinion and view, which were also noted on a mind map (see [16]).

Dimension 1: The vocabulary used by most of the participants in their corresponding responses, mainly consisted of words such as ‘difficulties’, ‘problem’, ‘cannot do/walk/function/express him/herself’, ‘loss’, among others, i.e., terms that are also often men-
tioned in the literature for constructing disabled people as ‘incompetent’ (see for example [67–69]). The most common and frequent nouns that were used when responding to the researcher’s question were problem and difficulties, as in the following illustrative extracts:

Meeting 1, Focus Group A, 20 December 2015
R: What’s the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word disability?
P1: Wheelchair
P2: They can’t move
P3: Basically, being deprived (sterisi) of activities
P4: Difficulty in communicating with others

Dimension 2: By interpreting the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, what seemed significant to participants in terms of defining disability was that disabled people were perceived as having difficulties in certain areas and that these difficulties arose from the individual’s inevitable condition as disabled. For example: ‘Fate. It was meant to be like that’; ‘God wanted it to be that way’ (Meeting 1 Focus Group A, 20 December 2015). These phrases insinuate that the state of being a disabled person cannot be altered and present the individual as deprived of agency.

The words ‘fate’ and ‘God’ provide the participant’s argument with more credit as God and fate are perceived as a form of authority and power that controls the inevitable situation of being disabled. In these extracts, disabled people are conceptualized through normative discourses that are interwoven with the participants’ beliefs about religion and fate. Disabled people are given the label of ‘incompetent’, a person who does not have agency over his/her incompetence since it is the will of God/fate. In this frame of thought, disabled people are also ‘excused’ for being ‘incompetent’ since they are victims of external powers such as God and fate, which are beyond their control.

In contrast, in terms of relationships, the participants often presented themselves as ‘competent’, in comparison with the ‘incompetent’ disabled people, in phrases such as: ‘… those of us who have our legs’ (Meeting 1 Focus Group B, 22 December 2015).

‘They cannot do what children do’ (Meeting 1 Focus Group B, 22 December 2015).

‘demonstrating that ‘they’ refers to disabled children and a comparison is made with an ‘other’, (or ‘us’), where ‘other’ and ‘us’ are children, whereas disabled children are not perceived as children. Furthermore, jokes between participants during the discussions, such as ‘Their brain does not work—the same as your brain’ (Meeting 1 Focus group B, 22 December 2015) indicated that something is not right with disabled people in comparison with non-disabled people. Valle and Connor [14] (p. 24) point out that jokes like this highlight disabled people’s insufficiency in doing something, denying in this way the construction of disabled people as ‘complex and capable’. The above understandings are in line with most of the participants’ posts on Facebook. Nevertheless, some of the participants’ Facebook group posts also involved understandings that seemed to deviate from the medical model and othering discourses. During the focus groups, the researcher asked students to reflect on the notion of ‘normality’ in the Facebook group, which triggered a series of different responses and representations. The participants reflected mostly by uploading pictures, as the extracts below indicate (Dimension 1).

Facebook group 19 January 2016–20 January 2016
R: I wonder what it means when we say ‘normal’. What do you think? (I remind u that u can reply by using comments, photos, and videos whatever u want)
P19: Personally, I believe the below
(participant (P19) posted a picture of a wall on which the phase ‘there is no normal just ordinary’ (translation) is written in Greek)

P10: I believe that by saying ‘normal’, we mean when we can do everything, without any difficulty, without any help (By making this comment the adolescent also posted a graphic with the following text: ‘Children with disabilities are like butterflies with a broken wing. They are just as beautiful as all the rest, but need a little help spreading their wings. The graphic also included a cloud with rainbow colour drops of rain)
Following this post, another adolescent (P8) posted a picture with a child using a walking aid at the background and the following text on top of the child picture ‘Please understand I have a disability not a disease. You can’t catch it. I may walk, talk, and move differently than you do, but on the inside I’m not so different’. The adolescent did not comment further on the post.

Dimension 2: The interpretation of the adolescents’ Facebook posts signals participants’ oscillation between constructions of disabled people as multilayered and multifaceted, and as incompetent. In terms of relationships, this conceptualization of disability seems to manifest a relationship of acceptance between the participants and disabled people, while in terms of politics, it perceives disabled people as ‘normal’. Consequently, the participants’ discourses in the focus groups construct disability as synonymous with individual pathology (i.e., that disability emerges from the individual and his/her physical impairment) [66]. Concurrently, though, mostly on the Facebook group, some of the adolescents also made attempts to challenge this view.

Dimension 3: The explanation focuses on why participants’ conceptualizations about disability are forged on what—at least at first sight—appears as an acute dichotomy between medical constructions and constructions that engage diversity as posts on Facebook indicated.

Understanding participants’ movement between contrasting constructions necessitates considering the cultural references that they encounter in the Cypriot context. Specifically, teachers in Cyprus tend to view disability through the medical model [70]. The teacher’s role is underlined in Messiou’s study [71], which showed that in Cyprus teachers appeared to be the most influential factor in children’s constructions of disabled peers. However, nowadays adolescents participate in face-to-face environments (e.g., school) where they interact with their teachers but, at the same time, they are also navigating online environments. Thus, what could perhaps account for the abovementioned ‘dichotomy’ is the multiplicity of ways that participants had to express the notion of ‘normal’ through multimodal means on social media platforms.

Within this framework of constructing disabled people as incompetent, multifaceted, and ‘normal’, the participants mentioned that disabled people require help due to their ‘problem’. It should be pointed out, however, that most of the participants emphasized that it is important not to show pity to disabled people, despite conceptualizing disabled people as ‘pitiful’.

4.1.2. Disability and Pitifulness

Participants often conceptualized disabled people as people in need, introvert, fragile, antisocial and sad.

Dimension 1: The vocabulary associated with this understanding includes phrases and words such ‘a lot of people need us’, ‘special’, ‘organising a fundraiser’, which are related to the construction of disabled people as people in need. Frequently used pronouns were ‘we’ (we have to offer help) and ‘they/these’ (these people/these persons). This kind of language was mostly used during the second meeting of Focus Group A in January, and during the individual online interviews in March when the researcher asked the participants what they thought people at their school and society felt about disability:

Meeting 2, Focus Group A, 30 January 2016
R: How do you think people feel about disability at your school/in society? Would you say you feel the same/differently—in what way?
P4: A lot of people need us, they have to be supported by us, and the state and the organisations that exist, these people have more needs than us, some needs that we must try to meet.

Individual online interviews, March 2016
R: How do you think people feel about disability at your school/in society? Would you say you feel the same/differently—in what way?
P12: I believe that all of us have a sensitive spot regarding this problem. We are all going to say, “Oh, what a pity”, but I think that’s where most people stop. The majority doesn’t do anything to help; they just say, “What a pity, it’s such a shame”, that kind of thing . . . they don’t do more, they don’t help, they don’t have the courage to do something.

Though the participants’ conceptualisation of disabled people as people in need was most evident in the data from the focus groups and individual interviews, there was also some data from the Facebook group, which gave rise to this understanding.

Facebook group, 31 December 2016

In particular, at the beginning of the study, a participant posted a video that shows Super Mario as a disabled person who initially cannot move due to environmental barriers. Then, he is able to move because the existence of ramps and other means makes his environment more accessible. However, this video produced the following comments from some participants, which illustrate that, in their opinion, it is crucial that disabled people have the help they need.

P19: Great video: through this video we can understand that these special people can do everything if they have a helping hand. That’s why I believe that we shouldn’t avoid them but help them!

P5: Friend, I totally agree with you! We can achieve everything if we have people in our life who support us and help us! As Rocky Balboa said, “it ain’t about how hard you hit. It’s about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward; how much you can take and keep moving forward.” You have to fight your fears and weaknesses. One of the biggest values in our lives is the people who are always by our side and helping us.

Dimension 2: By interpreting the vocabulary and grammatical devices used by the participants, in terms of significance, they place great importance on the fact that disabled people need help ‘from us’ (because they cannot do things by themselves due to their ‘problem’). It is also illustrated that, in general, we need to offer help to other people as ‘we shouldn’t avoid them but help them!’ Additionally, through the participants’ language, a relationship of othering is enacted. This is evident in comments such as ‘we organise various fundraisers, hold different events, and we try to include them in our daily lives in any way we can’. The pronoun ‘we’, infers that the participants perceive themselves as being a different group from disabled people; a group that from a more dominant and influential position has the power to help ‘them’, the other group, the disabled people’s group.

Turning to politics, it seems that participants consider charity as appropriate and right which indicates the charity model of disability. According to Hughes [72] (p. 71), ‘the charitable attachment to the disabled other is saturated with selfishness because it sustains one’s sense of ontological security and wholeness’. This ‘charitable attachment’ and ‘selfishness’ appears to be communicated through the participants’ language. Many of them underlined that helping disabled people makes them feel good about themselves.

Dimension 3: In explaining the findings of this sub-category, it appears that Radiomarathon’s motto, which states that ‘Even the smallest contribution is a big one’ had an impact on participants’ perceptions. The participants are exposed to this event for years, as teachers in primary schools very often utilise the Radiomarathon to raise disability awareness. Nevertheless, disability-related information is communicated through medical and charity discourses, underpinned by emotions of pity and sadness, rather than by human rights discourses as teachers ‘are trapped in their own false understandings of disability’ [51] (p. 573). At the same time, attention should be given to the different lenses that participants keep in play when perceiving charity. During the study, some of them argued help should not be offered in a way that shows pity, while fundraising events should also be used for raising awareness of issues related to disability. It could be argued that the charity and medical constructions are interrelated with participants’ conceptualization of disabled people as ‘invisible’.
4.1.3. Understanding Disability as Invisibility

In the context of this study, one key factor influencing students’ understandings of disability was participants’ lack of interaction with disabled people as well as the absence of disabled people’s representations on participants’ Facebook profiles. This ‘absence’ gave rise to the subthematic category of invisibility. According to Jones (2004; p. 21 cited in [73]) ‘such kind of interaction (in our case lack of interaction) does not ‘take place in a kind of virtual vacuum with little connection to the material worlds of the people’. In other words, as the findings below will illustrate, social media is embedded within the school’s context regarding participants’ understanding of disabled people as ‘invisible’.

Disabled People as Invisible in the School and Social Media Context

Dimension 1: The participants mentioned that they do not see disabled people at their school, and they rarely speak about disability in this context or on social media. The adverb ‘rarely’ was used largely by participants emphasizing the absence of disability in discussions they are involved in at school and social media. This understanding of disabled people as ‘invisible’ was particularly evident during the online interviews as shown below:

Individual Online Interviews, March 2016
R: What do you think is the relationship between today’s students (whether your age or younger) and the issue of disability?
P13: Let’s say I never had a person of my age, in my class, or at my school with a disability problem . . . so personally I don’t know how I would behave towards this person, but I think that if there are children with disabilities in schools then, sure, there are children that accept them and help them. Every kid is different; I don’t know.
P4: I mean, we’re rarely going to see someone disabled at school. Usually, they go somewhere else.
R: Do you or your friends post things related to disability on Facebook?
P3: Erm . . . rarely . . . I mean only if it’s something that they are going to like very much and they are going to say ‘respect’ and things like that.

Dimension 2: The interpretation of these extracts discloses as significant that disabled children are non-existent in the school and the social media participants are involved in. According to the participants, it is not common to see disabled children in their schools or watch videos related to disabled people on social media. Additionally, participants’ commentary seems to communicate that invisibility of disabled students in the school and social media is considered a normal situation. As Müller, Klijn, and Van Zoonen [74] (p. 2) point out ‘in the case of under-representation, the invisibility of people with physical impairments is assumed to lead audiences to conclude that the marginalisation of disability in society is a natural state of affairs’.

Regarding schools, as the participants mentioned, disabled students ‘usually go somewhere else’. As Barton [75] (p. 53), argues special education removes disabled ‘unwanted’ students to other ‘spheres’. Arguably, in the Cypriot context, segregative educational settings such as the special unit, that is a separated class for a small number of students with disabilities within the mainstream school setting, and the special school constitute the ‘other sphere’. According to the findings, special units appear to be an essential part of the participants’ everyday experiences with disability.

Disabled Students Are Only ‘Visible’ in the Special Unit

Though participants were not specifically asked about special units, they often referred to these during the focus group meetings. Part of disabled students’ invisibility in schools, not only in terms of seeing disabled people or talk about disability, but also in terms of interaction with disabled peers, could be linked to the experiences that participants of the study have with the special unit. Disabled students are isolated in the special unit. Hence, they are not ‘visible’ to the rest of the school. They are absent and excluded from most of the mainstream school classroom activities.
The above were particularly evident during the third meeting with Focus Group B. In this meeting, special units came up in the conversations when the researcher prompted discussion on human rights with a photo from a news article. The article was about a dyslexic girl that had asked the bus driver to tell her when the next stop was because she could not read the schedule, and the bus driver refused, so the girl filed a human rights complaint. By this the participants recalled that in their school, they have a dyslexic girl in the special unit.

Dimension 1: The vocabulary used in the dialogue that followed included phrases such as ‘the kids in the unit’, ‘shouldn’t be with those kids’, ‘they can’t attend class like the others’. Frequent nouns and adjectives used in the discussion included ‘problem’ and ‘special unit kid’. Frequent verbs involve ‘couldn’t’ (do something), ‘shouldn’t’ (be in the class with other kids). Thus, the characterisation of students attending the special unit as ‘special unit kids’ was often used by the participants.

The frequent pronouns ‘we’ (vs) ‘they’ were used ‘they couldn’t cope with the demands—with the stuff we do’. Moreover, it was considered evident by the majority of the participants that ‘the kids in the unit’ cannot do specific things in mainstream classrooms, so the special unit constitutes an appropriate solution. The vocabulary on what peers ‘cannot’ do also indicates understanding disability as ‘incompetence’, while the lack of interaction between non-disabled and disabled students attending the special unit, indicates understanding disability as ‘invisible’ from mainstream school spaces, both discussed earlier in the paper. However, one of the participants had a different opinion, saying that, ‘in this way, they separate the children in the special unit’.

Dimension 2: In interpreting participants’ dialogue, what is displayed as significant is the participants’ conceptualization of the special unit. The special unit’s existence is perceived as ultimately important for supporting those children who, they believe, cannot cope with schooling’s regular demands. The participants appear to hold strong views about the necessity of the special unit for ‘those kids’, though a single participant acknowledged that in this way, the kids are separated. The existence of special unit created the label of ‘the kids in the special unit’. The necessity of the special unit was also an opinion expressed by most of the teachers in Symeonidou and Phtiaka’s study [47], most of whom also pointed out that the special unit is necessary due to the current educational system. Simultaneously, though, the teachers in Symeonidou and Phtiaka’s study indicated that special units lead to the stigmatisation of disabled students by their non-disabled peers, which is also supported by the findings of the present study.

In terms of relationships, ‘the special unit kids’ labelling communicates disabled students’ isolation from non-disabled students. Participants said that the only friends that students attending the special unit have are the others in the special unit. The phrase also seems to communicate that disabled students attending the special unit are conceptualized as something else, something different—without ‘normal’ friends—compared to the participants in the study. This finding is in line with literature indicating that non-disabled students tend to marginalise disabled students attending the special unit [15,76]. In essence, the participants’ language illustrates that disabled students are ‘visible’ only through a specific segregating, marginalised lens, that of the ‘special unit kids’ and not in the context of daily life at school.

Dimension 3: In explaining the findings of this category, it is important to engage with two of the main conceptualizations that emerged: disabled children as ‘invisible’ and as ‘special unit kids’. Arguably, these two constructions are interrelated. According to the findings of this category, disabled people are excluded from the school setting and the social media environment. In essence, their existence and, consequently, their visibility is evident only through the lens of segregated settings, (e.g., special unit), while inclusion in the social media context only emerges on specific special days (e.g., Radiomarathon). Thus, disabled students’ existence and visibility occurs only in special settings.

In summarizing the findings of this study what seems to emerge is that perceiving disabled people as invisible is linked to the medical and charity model, which is further
discussed in Section 5. However, before proceeding to the discussion it is important to note that in every research study there are certain constraints due to different circumstances that need to be identified. In the context of the present study the following can be spelled out. Firstly, and most importantly, despite the attempts to include disabled and non-disabled adolescents this was not possible. It is suggested that if disabled adolescents had participated in the study, it would further contribute to understanding adolescents’ conceptualizations of disability. Secondly, there were a limited number of adolescents participating in the study, which, however, is often in line with the design of a qualitative research approach. In addition, not of all the participants knew each other during the course of the study and it was not possible to arrange a meeting among focus group A and focus group B. In turn, this resulted in most adolescents’ disengagement with the Facebook Group, especially in the beginning of the study, as they were not feeling comfortable enough to share their thoughts ‘publicly’ and comment in the online discussions. In terms of analysis, this study analysed only adolescents’ interpretations of visual means, which is considered another constraint, as analysing the visual means could further expand researcher’s understanding of the ways that adolescents conceptualize disability. Despite these constraints, the findings of the present study hold important implications for inclusive education.

5. Discussion and Implications for Inclusive Education

This research was instigated to forefront the perspectives of adolescent students in Cyprus regarding the ways they conceptualize disability in a blended environment of interactions. Data analysis resulted in three main types of disability conceptualization discussed in findings. Adolescents’ conceptualisations of disability as incompetence and pitifulness constitute ‘common sense’ understandings of disability [77]. In addition, they are linked to disability discourses of othering. According to Zoniou-Sideri et al. [77] (p. 282) ‘the common sense understanding sees disability as a well-defined condition based on a clear-cut distinction between disability and able-bodiedness, between the minority of ‘them’ and the majority of ‘us’. In this way, disability is presented as otherness’.

A common feature in adolescents’ understandings of disability was the dominance of the medical and charity models of disability throughout the study in both face-to-face and Facebook discussions. These did not seem to differ between the ‘real’ and the ‘virtual’ experiences of participants [31] despite adolescents’ attempts on certain occasions to deviate from these models. Through the medical and charity models, non-disabled people are presented as ‘Good Samaritans’ who help ‘powerless’ disabled people [72]. Although the participants did not directly mention that disabled people need financial help, this was indicated by references to charity. Similarly, references to the support and love that disabled people need from others can be linked to the stereotypes/prejudices that are prevalent in Cypriot culture, constructing disabled people as people who suffer only due to their disability [78].

The findings also highlight participants’ conceptualization of disabled people as invisible, as they experience this in both school face-to-face settings, as well as in the social media they are involved in. Invisibility of disabled people is linked to various disability constructions, discussed not only in the Cyprus setting. This is a concern identified in research work in many other countries [79] (Saito & Ishiyama, 2005 cited in [79]), as well as in research work analysing different types of data (e.g., textual analyses of popular media (the cinema and TV) and canonical arts (literature and theatre) (Barton, 2001 and Mitchell & Snyder, 2000; cited in [80], p. 3).

In this study, disabled people’s invisibility was infused with important aspects of adolescent life, and arguably partly responsible for the way disability is perceived as in incompetence (medicalization) and pity (charity). According to participants, disabled people are absent—hence invisible from the communicative environment of social media and school settings. Disabled people’s invisibility within these communicative contexts appears as an important barrier in establishing inclusive schools. It indicates that constructions of
disabled people are not situated in a vacuum among the different communicative contexts; on the contrary, there is constant interaction among them, depicting a communicative matrix. Within this communicative matrix, disabled people are constructed as invisible through a multiplicity of means: through adolescents’ language (‘we don’t see disabled people at school’); through educational practices (at school, in general, we don’t do much) and through posts on Facebook (‘I rarely see things on Facebook related to disability’). Therefore, considering the multiplicity of means and the constant interaction among them, disabled people’s invisibility in blended environments could be characterised as multimodal, referring simultaneously to disabled people’s physical invisibility and disabled people’s invisibility of representations in online contexts.

One of the more problematic manifestations of multimodal invisibility is that if disabled children are ‘visible’, their visibility takes place in special places and special occasions. As research in other settings has indicated, the existing power relations within the ‘physical world’, meaning the exclusion of disabled people due to the intersection of different factors, is as well replicated in the media milieu [20,21]. Furthermore, as Xinaris [81] (p. 67) argued, ‘As there is no clear boundary between the online and offline worlds, what happens online matters offline and vice versa’. Perceiving research on disability constructions through this continuum holds implications for inclusive education.

On the one hand, exploring students’ (including disabled and non-disabled students) and teachers’ perceptions of disability by adopting the viewpoint of the online-offline continuum might provide a deeper understanding of disability conceptualizations in contemporary environments. In addition, it might contribute into gaining insights into how to challenge traditional understandings and stereotypical assumptions of disabled students occurring in these environments. On the other hand, in methodological terms, rather than ‘throwing’ students and teachers into a philosophical battle that could result in their disengagement with research and educational purposes, it might be easier for them to discuss disability, and to explore their understandings of disability, by utilising their everyday reality, meaning the blending of face to face and online interactions. As Bolander and Locher [73] (p. 6) pointed out ‘If we acknowledge the situatedness of all interaction . . . we might be guided by consideration of how an individual’s practices, norms and ideologies about practices may thus be shaped either by his/her offline presence and/or other simultaneously occurring online practices’.

Delving deeper into this argument, it is important to take into account the blended environments in current student-teachers preservice programmes for disability awareness. This contemporary space appears important for confronting disabled students’ multimodal invisibility. It is suggested, then, that for engaging students-teachers in preservice programmes, and students in reflective and critical discussions regarding disability, their educational world should be compatible with their everyday experiences. As Mills [82] (p. 44) points out in relation to literacy practices, ‘Students need guidance by experts that moves them beyond the known to the new. It is time for Shrek to meet Vygotsky in the multimodal literacy practices of adolescents at school’.

By extending Mills’ argument in the sphere of inclusive education in relation to disability constructions, it is proposed that we can rely on the ‘known’, meaning student-teachers and students’ everyday multimodal blended experiences, to encourage ‘new’ positive meanings with regard to the concept of disability. Equally important is to consider what kind of actions can be taken within this learning ‘space’. For instance, in which ways theoretical frameworks aligned with inclusive education such as Disability Studies in Education can be infused in this environment? What kind of multimodal means can be utilised for helping student-teachers, students and teachers to challenge disabled people’s multimodal invisibility?

This argument applies to every aspect of diversity [83]. Hence, it is suggested that the blend of face to face and online multimodal interactions could be utilised for exploring and challenging students’ (traditional) understandings, not only in relation to disability but also in regard to gender, different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, gender, sexuality
or any other notions of ‘diversity’ that exist in our society. Utilising a blend of face to face and online multimodal interactions can be applied to secondary education for exploring adolescents’ constructions of diversity and to tertiary education for exploring preservice teachers’ constructions in undergraduate/postgraduate courses concerning diversity. Data collected from these studies can, in turn, contribute to designing future preservice teachers’ programmes focusing on inclusive education.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, the findings of this study indicate that adolescents’ understandings of disability in blended environments are mostly interlinked with the medical and the charity models of disability. Nevertheless, disability constitutes a complex concept; therefore, further studies are needed to explore this complexity in blended environments. In addition, this study took place quite some time before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and emergency remote teaching, which seemed to reveal additional challenges for inclusive education. Thus, it now seems even more important for the field of inclusive education to capitalize on students’ and teachers’ experience with the online milieu, to research their perspectives about disability within blended settings. Attempting to understand a multifaceted concept such as disability in the communicative matrix compiled from the constant intersection of online and offline environments might provide researchers and educational practitioners in the field of inclusive education with a more holistic understanding of disability. The expectation is to facilitate further engagement in critical reflections about ways to challenge traditional understandings of disability, contributing to the establishment of inclusive schools in a rapidly progressing technological era.

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