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Processes Empowering Disabled Students in the Co-Production of Inclusive Higher Education

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Abstract: Although education is supposed to be an empowering process, some students experience the opposite. Disabled university students face multiple discriminating mechanisms during their studies, indicating that they are out of place. This study explores a participatory action research (PAR) study where 11 disabled students collaborated with university staff in planning and implementing measures to promote inclusion at a Norwegian university. The study aims to contribute knowledge of the processes empowering disabled students during co-production of inclusive higher education. Qualitative data were collected during the PAR study from January 2021 to March 2022 including audio recordings from workshops, reflection meetings and a group discussion, field notes from observing students in action as well as the students' reflections notes and notes from shared analysis and shared writing. A reflexive thematic analysis resulted in the generation of four processes that were believed to support student empowerment: being united with inclusive faculty allies, belonging in a student fellowship, identifying an injustice, and experiencing meaning and change. This study indicates ways to strengthen the universities' capacities to work towards inclusion, social change, and justice.

Keywords: disabled students; higher education; co-production; empowerment; inclusion; participation; social justice

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1. Introduction

Education is empowering (Freire 2005). Higher education has the potential to empower students to become well informed, competent, prospering, action-oriented workers, and citizens. For disabled students, however, higher education can instead be associated with feelings of powerlessness, where they may face multiple forms of discrimination (Dolmage 2017), negatively affecting their identities (Kraus 2008; Liasidou 2014), opportunities to succeed during education, and consequently, their employment and financial prospects (Legard 2012; Nolan and Gleeson 2017). There is currently no record of how many disabled students there are in Norway, but an indication can be provided through surveys based on self-identification. In Norway, 25% of students in higher education report an impairment, where the majority of students (70%) state that their impairments are not immediately visible to others (Hauschildt et al. 2021; SSB 2018). Disabled students often experience the feeling of not fitting in, as well as challenges regarding misconceptions and harmful stigmatization (Kraus 2008; Lightner et al. 2012). Different strategies are practiced

regarding disclosure where students are often conflicted between telling or hiding, striving to adapt to the ableist culture in higher education (Dolmage 2017; Grimes et al. 2019; Sapir and Banai 2023). University staff, on the other hand, lack knowledge and resources on how to include and support disabled students (Ristad et al. 2024; R. Svendby 2020; R. B. Svendby 2024). While graduating from higher education positively affects the chances of obtaining employment for people living with a disability (Legard 2012), they are less likely to pursue and graduate from postsecondary education compared to non-disabled people (Dolmage 2017; Kim and Lee 2016).

Ensuring people have access and equal opportunities to take part in educational prospects, without discrimination, is a fundamental human right (Sachs et al. 2021; United Nations 2006). Inclusion is the educational institution's obligation and not students' responsibility. Ideally, equal participation in all aspects of student life should be the standard in higher education, where students living with a disability do not need to be empowered. However, discriminating and unfair systems require attention and awareness to actively empower individuals and universities, thereby gaining social justice for all. PAR methodology presents opportunities to engage in empowering processes. For instance, being actively involved in one's life situation, collaborating with others, and gaining awareness of ongoing issues are all processes in which people may feel empowered (Freire 2005; Rappaport 1987). There are studies that document empowering outcomes when engaging disabled students in PAR (Agarwal et al. 2015; Bessaha et al. 2020). Promoting opportunities for disabled students to engage in empowering processes, learning, and advocating for their rights not only has documented benefits for the individual students, but also has the potential to generate relevant knowledge and promote social, attitudinal, and physical changes (Agarwal et al. 2015; Bessaha et al. 2020; Dollinger and Hanna 2023; Luthuli and Wood 2020).

Empowerment is an often-desired objective and outcome when it comes to improving circumstances for oppressed and marginalized groups in society (Freire 2005; Rappaport 1981). The concept of empowerment can be intricate and highly context-dependent, but entails—in one way or another—(re)gaining a sense of power and control over one's life (Askheim 2007; Rappaport 1987; Zimmerman 2000). Although the evidence of barriers and discriminating mechanisms to equal participation through higher education is well documented, these barriers are complex, and the means by which inclusive higher education can be achieved do not appear to be straightforward. Research indicates that there is value and potential in actively involving the students that this inclusion concerns, as well as utilizing these students' voices and competencies in developing inclusive education and pathways to employment (Kraus 2008; Nolan and Gleeson 2017). In empowerment theory and research, the people at the center of concern are to be viewed as collaborators (Rappaport 1987). Co-creation and co-production are terms describing the collaborative processes where citizens and users are invited as active stakeholders in decisions and solutions that concern them (Brandsen et al. 2018). The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) communicates the importance of actively involving people experiencing disability in decision making processes (United Nations 2006). Being involved in decision making and participatory processes can benefit both individuals and communities (Horghagen et al. 2018), where feelings of empowerment are a common outcome of such collaboration (Freire 2005; Needham and Carr 2009). Theorizing on human development and growth, Bronfenbrenner can add to the understanding of empowerment in terms of viewing such developments as dependent on multiple system levels, including the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner 1994). The microsystem refers to a person's immediate surroundings in a given context, for instance, interactions and activities within a person's family or group of friends. The mesosystem entails the processes occurring between microsystems, such as between the school and home. While the micro- and meso-level are processes that include the 'developing human', the exosystem contains at least one setting that does not include the person, but which indirectly affects the person's microsystem

(Bronfenbrenner 1994). The macrosystem is made up of the overall characteristics of the micro-, meso-, and exosystems within a culture (Bronfenbrenner 1994).

Universities' medical approach to disability is often cited as a major reason for the exclusion of disabled students, placing the burden and responsibility on students to adapt to the ableist structures in higher education (Dolmage 2017; Liasidou 2014; Nieminen 2021). How societies conceptualize disability critically affects how people develop a disability identity (Kraus 2008; Swain and French 2000). The act of empowering individuals and groups emphasizes the goal of fostering personal resources and growth, as opposed to viewing people as being in need of help from professionals (Rappaport 1981). Research emphasizes a need for universities to rethink the ways in which disability is approached, where positive identity development is promoted, and students are included in democratic partnerships as well as disability activism and pride (Hauschildt et al. 2021; Nieminen 2022; Shpigelman et al. 2022).

This study follows up on the results from a Participatory Action Research (PAR) study where disabled students collaborated with university staff to understand the barriers to inclusion, and to plan and implement actions to generate change at a Norwegian university. The current study aims to generate an understanding of the processes empowering students during co-production. The results have the potential to inform future co-creation and co-production processes, as well as strengthen universities' capacities to work towards promoting disabled students' empowerment. The following research question guided this study: "What characterizes the processes of empowering disabled students during co-production of inclusive higher education?"

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design and Context

This study took an interpretive and social constructionist approach to the preparation, analysis, and reporting of the study. Social constructionism rests on the assumptions that we interpret and construct our realities, and that they are formed socially through history, culture, and our lived experiences (Gergen 1992). Such views also align with PAR principles, which place value on lived and learning experiences as well as generating change and new knowledge (Cornish et al. 2023; Lawson et al. 2015). PAR principles guided a co-production process which entailed two phases of recruiting participants and collecting data. The first phase entailed a series of workshops where students and researchers co-creatively identified barriers to inclusion and planned ways to address them. These planned actions were implemented in collaboration with relevant staff during the second phase. The PAR study indicated transforming and empowering outcomes for both the students and the university (Bjørnerås et al. 2023a, 2023b). Identifying empowering outcomes during the PAR study justifies the inquiry as to what processes supported such a transformation. Therefore, this study adopts a meta-perspective on the data generated through the study to gain a broadened understanding of the processes promoting student empowerment.

2.2. Participants

Participants were recruited to take part in the study through flyers placed on campus billboards, through e-mails, and posts on the university website. Ten students participated in the first phase of the study, whereby seven of them continued their participation into the next phase along with recruiting one additional student. In total, eleven students were formally included as participants during the PAR study. They were aged between 19 and 35 (mean 28.6) where five identified as female, five as male and one as non-binary. The participants represented 10 different programs at Bachelor's and Master's level, affiliated to five different faculties (Social and Educational Sciences, Natural Sciences, Engineering, Medicine and Health Sciences, and Information Technology and Electrical Engineering). The students self-reported one to three impairments each, including mobility, vision and hearing impairments, fatigue, dyslexia, ADHD, and autism spectrum disorder. During the PAR study, the student participants collaborated with a wide range of university staff,

including university researchers, the head of the department, representatives from the disability services, communication staff and lecturers.

2.3. Data Generation

Data were generated throughout the PAR study. Seven co-creation workshops, lasting approximately two hours each, were held during the spring semester of 2021 and were mostly digital due to the pandemic at the time. The workshops entailed students (n = 10) and researchers (the first and last author) (n = 2) utilizing their experiences together with the research literature to understand the barriers to inclusion at the university and to plan ways to address them. Data were generated through audio recordings from the workshops, supplemented with field notes from the two researchers along with students' reflection notes (n = 10). The barriers identified through the students' experiences and the research literature were organized and analyzed in a digital mind map during the workshops, which were included in the dataset, as well as the documents from shared writing, where actions were planned.

During the fall semester of 2021 and spring semester of 2022, students (n = 8) and relevant university staff implemented the action plan. The actions taken included, for example, raising disability awareness among fellow students and staff. The students gave presentations at the university, participated in meetings with relevant staff, developed a checklist for inclusive teaching, and started a student organization. Student involvement in the research process entailed participation in project meetings, attending dialogue conferences, presenting at national and international conferences, and co-authoring papers. Data were generated by the researcher's field notes from participatory observation during actions, audio recordings of meetings where actions were planned and evaluated (n = 3), and a group discussion (n = 1) at the at the end of the data collection period. The total data material resulted in 448 pages, including 293 transcribed pages (word count = 82,550), students' reflection notes (10 pages), and researchers' field notes comprising 145 typed and hand-written pages.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data analysis was based on a reflexive thematic method which is a flexible and systematic approach that utilizes researchers' subjectivity in the analytic process (Braun and Clarke 2019, 2022). The authors of the current study had all been involved in the PAR study—albeit to different extents—and were, to varying degrees, familiar with the activities carried out and the collected data. Initially, the entire dataset was read repeatedly while taking notes and highlighting sections relevant to the research question. The sections of interest were converted into codes through deductive and inductive phases in the next stage and organized in a digital mind map, available for all authors. Several meetings were arranged between the authors, including one student participant, to discuss potential themes. The themes were further defined and renamed into processes in an iterative process. The results were developed within a constructionist viewpoint (Gergen 1992) and are the interpretations of the authors who have varying experiences, beliefs, and backgrounds. As most of the authors of this study were actively involved in the PAR study, our presumptions could be compromised based on established preconceptions of what happened, and why, during this process. However, our experiences can also promote a deeper understanding of the case which is under study. By combining our interpretations, we were focused on generating richer nuances, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2019), rather than reaching a consensus. The remaining student participants were invited to provide comments on the final manuscript. Including participants in the process of manuscript development strengthens the trustworthiness of the results (Karnieli-Miller et al. 2009).

2.5. Ethical Considerations

The PAR study followed ethical guidelines for conducting research where participation was based on informed voluntary consent from the participants (Helseforskningsloven 2008). However, the nature of the PAR design can present substantial ethical considerations and challenges, where ethical vigilance is crucial (Lid and Rugseth 2019). Through the PAR study, maintaining power equality, participant anonymity, and not exposing participants to burdens and stressful situations were daily feats. The researchers strived to safeguard the ethical aspects carefully, as the students also did between themselves. The participants were made aware of what challenges may arise before participation, such as those relating to public exposure, for instance. Being sensitive to the complex ethical challenges that follow a PAR design is important, but giving people who are interested in participating an opportunity to do so is also essential (Khanlou and Peter 2005; Lid and Rugseth 2019). Thus, students decided freely what activities they wanted to be a part of, as well as how they would contribute. This included both the collaborative actions as well as the research process. However, although PAR methodology is intended to neutralize the power traditionally held by researchers, there are numerous implicit and explicit circumstances that challenge an equal power balance (Karnieli-Miller et al. 2009). The researchers, due to their positions and titles, with dedicated time and resources to spend on the project, present symbolic, organizational, and financial ascendancy over the process (Karnieli-Miller et al. 2009; Lid and Rugseth 2019). Although an equal power balance can be hard to obtain, experiences from the PAR study point to the importance of building a trustful atmosphere and being transparent, respectful, and approachable (Bjørnerås et al. 2023a).

3. Results

The study explored the mechanisms that characterize the processes empowering the student participants during the co-production of inclusive education. Four processes were identified through the analysis. The first process, being united with inclusive faculty allies was found to be fundamental for supporting and maintaining students' empowerment throughout the PAR study. Three additional processes were believed to further promote student empowerment: belonging in a student fellowship, identifying an injustice, and experiencing meaning and change. The empowering processes can be seen as developmental, where one builds on the next. While the processes follow a chronological order to a certain extent, they are, nevertheless, believed to be interconnected, as visualized in Figure 1. The processes and characteristics are presented in the narratives below and summarized in Table 1.

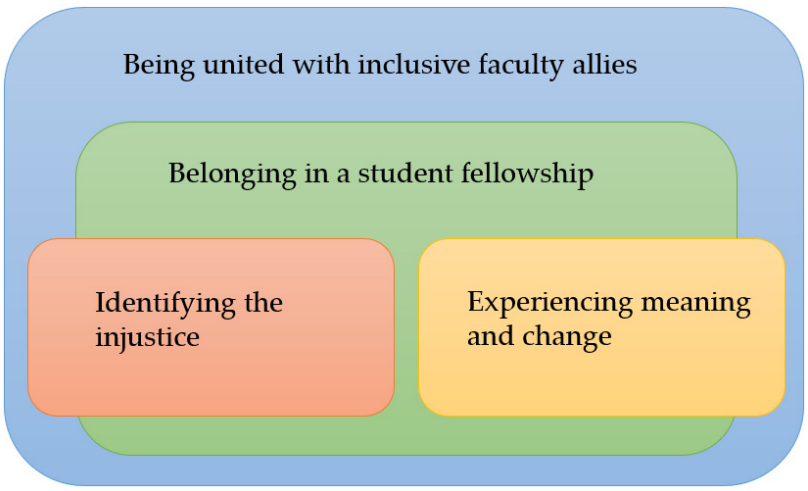


Figure 1. Processes empowering disabled students during co-production.

Table 1. Processes and characteristics empowering disabled students during co-production.

Empowering Processes	Processual Characteristics
Being united with inclusive faculty allies	Having dedicated driving forces Being free from the practical and administrative burden Being ethically safeguarded Being in an inclusive atmosphere Developing mutual partnerships alliances with staff Achieving student representation on multiple arenas
Belonging in a student fellowship	Developing a social network and peer support Experiencing social belonging Creating a safe space for sharing Having safety and strength in numbers Experiencing a sense of community and solidarity Mobilizing powers
Identifying the injustice	Learning their rights Sharing and systemizing experiences Adopting a social understanding of disability Constructing new identities Developing a consciousness of the social and political context
Experiencing meaning and change	Becoming agents of social justice Utilizing own resources and competencies Being acknowledged and respected Developing skills and strategies Taking part in career-building experiences

3.1. The Empowering Process of Being United with Inclusive Faculty Allies

Based on experiences from the co-production process, empowering students strongly depended on the efforts of dedicated faculty allies and driving forces. The primary ally, in this case, was initially a researcher, who had the time and resources to start up and support the students' engagement from start to finish. Furthermore, the faculty partnerships that the students developed during the PAR study were found to further promote the students' empowerment.

The researcher took the overall practical and ethical responsibility throughout the process and enabled participation according to each student's needs and capacities. The researcher facilitated the PAR study in becoming a process of shared decision making, where students were offered control of all aspects of the co-production process. The students had the opportunity to choose their mode of communication, as well as platforms for collaboration in an environment inciting autonomy and self-determination. The students played active roles in planning and carrying out actions throughout the PAR study. Still, a significant amount of work is associated with arranging and supporting such developments. Having faculty allies who took the burden of administration was considered one of the most important elements in enabling the students to come together and use their voices.

The researcher actively worked on fostering an inclusive atmosphere through the PAR study. Time was spent reflecting upon the group atmosphere, and the researcher was sensitive toward displaying inclusiveness, approachability, generosity, and respect. Inclusive attitudes characterized the process, both within the student group and in student–staff interactions. This facilitated partnerships based on trust and respect, promoting a safe environment for students to lower their guard, feel comfortable, and speak their minds.

The researcher initiated discussions and activities during the PAR study, and reached out to relevant parties based on the students' ideas. The partnerships created, for instance, with the disability services, promoted mutual relationships between the students and staff in fighting for a common cause, enabling win–win situations. The analysis shows how these facilitations by the researcher created predictable and disability-positive spaces, leading to the students raising their voices, both among themselves and with the other stakeholders.

3.2. The Empowering Process of Belonging in a Student Fellowship

Through the PAR study, the students developed a fellowship among themselves, and students highlighted the importance of the fellowship in becoming a voice at the university.

The results show that many of the student participants entered the PAR study with confusion regarding their student and disability identities. Many described feelings of being left alone to navigate disability information and to find solutions, all the while being conflicted between standing out or fitting in. The students were continuously met with indications of being out of place and a burden to professors and fellow students alike, and they carefully considered what role to play in different study situations. By meeting others with similar experiences and sharing their stories, they discovered a recognition of their experiences and found a place where they were accepted for who they are. The students' sharing processes was an important contribution to building relationships within the group, as well as a significant part in forming the groundwork for the aims of further collaborative work. The results indicate the significance of ensuring the time and a safe place for sharing. Platforms for socializing, both in-person and digitally, were established during the PAR study. During this process, their individual experiences developed into collective thoughts and understandings. 'Being independent, but not alone' was a slogan and vision the students created and embraced during their collaboration. The result indicated that feelings of belonging to a social group based on shared perceptions generated a fellowship and a solidarity that encouraged the students to come forward, no longer on their own behalf, but as representatives of a community.

This fellowship, furthermore, represented both a safety and a strength when bringing actions forward. For instance, when giving presentations, the students desired safety in numbers. Likewise, strength in numbers was believed to be important in gaining attention and achieving a breakthrough, such as when planning an action to be carried out on enrollment day in front of the whole university. As such, their strength and safety were rooted in the collective approach. Although the fellowship was believed to empower them, they did not want to stand out.

Feelings of belonging to a social group, with a common purpose and experiencing genuine support from group members promoted a safe and dedicated space for the students to showcase their voices. The significance of the fellowship and the awakened solidarity became clear when the PAR study came to an end. Students raised concerns about the unmet need for a social network for disabled students at the university. As a result, the students formally established a student organization to maintain their social connections, enabling their fellowship to grow and facilitating the mobilization of their powers.

3.3. The Empowering Process of Identifying the Injustice

Based on the sharing and learning processes during the PAR study, the students constructed new understandings of the barriers, and consequently, the concepts of disability and inclusion. As such, they identified the injustice they were exposed to in higher education.

The process of identifying injustice developed through multiple stages. The sharing processes, which dominated at the beginning, but also reoccurred throughout the PAR study, presented opportunities for the students to understand the local circumstances and issues. The sharing processes also promoted students to relate to other students' experiences, as well as to gain a deeper understanding of their own choices. Through incorporating local policies and regulations and findings from the research literature with their own experiences, learning their rights, and conducting a collaborative analysis, students pieced a puzzle together, identified the issues and the responsible parties, and visualized solutions.

In implementing planned actions while collaborating with relevant staff within the university, the students' understandings became nuanced, and new barriers and solutions emerged. Barriers first perceived solely as an individual lecturer's reluctance, for instance, to accommodate for different learning needs, developed into seeing the barriers on a political level such as the lack of regulations and legislations to ensure universally designed learning environments.

The students' understanding of disability changed during the process of learning their rights and systematically organizing, discussing, and addressing the barriers to inclusion. Disability was no longer a quality within their bodies and minds, but a mechanism they were exposed to by their surroundings' misconceptions and lack of disability knowledge and awareness. Taking the burden of disability and responsibility of inclusion off the students' shoulders was believed to present a renewed way for students to view themselves in the higher education context. As such, opportunities to construct new identities were created. In adopting a social understanding of disability, the students discovered the injustice that exists both within higher education and in society, and a joint frustration led to an informed and targeted enthusiasm to act and use their voices.

3.4. The Empowering Process of Experiencing Meaning and Change

The informed dedication to change the discriminating mechanisms promoted student activism fueled by a heightened awareness. The analysis indicates that the students' empowerment was supported by experiencing meaningfulness in the cause and seeing that their efforts were generating change. Through their actions, the students got to showcase their knowledge and became agents of social justice and change.

The students came together over a common goal, where their expertise was valued, and their views were taken seriously, both within the student group and by the university staff. While taking part in the PAR study, some of the students expressed concerns related to time and resource constraints, as well as worrying about whether carrying out actions would go beyond the limits of their comfort zone. Although the students were in control of the extent of their contributions, they implemented more actions than initially planned through the PAR study. The results of the analysis point to students experiencing a strong sense of meaningfulness when able to utilize their competencies for a greater good, promoting a heightened belief in their cause.

The researcher facilitating the process ensured time for debriefing and group reflection during the PAR study. Doing so was found to be important for the students' understanding of their achievements. Providing time to evaluate the actions taken and their own efforts presented the students with opportunities to express their thoughts in regard to the process and their contributions, as well as opportunities to receive feedback from peers and staff on the actions taken. This process was found to generate a belief in the significance and value of their voices. For the students, it also enabled the development of actions to new knowledge and improved the next action.

Taking part in the study generated opportunities for the students to engage in additional learning processes and to develop skills and strategies. For instance, the students got to practice communication and advocacy skills, leadership skills, and were able to work with the development of disclosure strategies in their group as well as in the actions carried out. The researcher provided the students with formal documentation of their contributions and skills. The students' participation in the study, as such, can be perceived as meaningful in the sense that taking part added to their professional, and personal, development.

The results also suggest that the experience of meaning and change is related to the existential need of being a valued contributor and viewed as a resource. This belief in one's own resources and competencies was a transformation that contrasted the ways the students were used to being viewed by other students and staff at the university. With new roles such as disability consultants, activists, and ambassadors, they entered positions of recognition, status, and power.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to explore what characterizes the processes promoting student empowerment in the co-production of inclusive higher education. The results presented (characteristics related to) four processes that were found to empower students in becoming a voice at the university. Empowerment can be considered as both outcomes or processes (Zimmerman 2000) and occurs in and between people, policies, groups, and communities

(Rappaport 1981, 1987), which also characterizes the processes in this study. To be empowered, as such, is an individual or group experience that cannot be allocated to a person by someone else. Knowledge of empowering processes and outcomes can be utilized in both future co-production processes as well as faculty inclusion work and policies involving disabled students in higher education.

The most dominating process for supporting students' empowerment was believed to be ascribed to being united with inclusive faculty allies. This overarching theme supported the remaining processes through the PAR study. According to Bronfenbrenner (1994), understanding human growth relies on understanding the full extent of the ecological system surrounding human development. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory can be a helpful model for considering the social systems which enable and support growth, and, in this case, students' empowerment. As such, the process of being united with inclusive faculty allies can relate to all system levels in Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (Bronfenbrenner 1994). The researcher responsible for the PAR study was believed to be key to this development in how she enabled student participation and promoted individual and group awareness and the development of student–staff partnerships. The PAR study approach and methodology indicate a process that can extend across the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems, and as such has the potential to affect individuals, groups, attitudes, staff, the university, politics, and practices. Thus, PAR presents the opportunity for transformative changes through working through a bottom-up process, rather than a top-down management policy that may not be relevant for those concerned (Cornish et al. 2023).

All processes constructed from the analysis can be viewed as dependent on not only the contextual anchoring within university resources, but also on the fact that faculty allies displayed attitudes of being inclusive and approachable. As such, this indicates the importance of the researcher's role in the PAR methodology, a role not only concerned with skills to implement processes, but also personal skills that support the students' development. Cornish et al. (2023) argue the need for soft skills in participatory researchers, for instance, genuine kindness and respect for others, an openness to learning, being patient, willingness to be uncomfortable and being confronted, and allowing power to be shared. In this case, the researcher supporting the process was sensitive to including the students and took active decisions, enabling power to be shared.

Being united with faculty allies was also related to the student–staff partnerships that were created and the generation of learning opportunities for all parties. There is evidence that universities still follow a support model based on medical conceptualization, where disability is viewed and addressed as a defect and an individual concern, ignoring the social and environmental barriers (Dolmage 2017; Nieminen 2021). The results from this study indicate that the students developed a social understanding of disability as they discovered the environmental barriers disabling them. This view influenced their narratives and actions with the potential of promoting a new culture within their partnerships with staff. Universities can adopt an affirmative model of disability (Swain and French 2000) to promote a positive identity development for students. Recent research in Norway has found that university professionals form decisions on a weak foundation when it comes to whether to support disabled students or not, where each individual's disability knowledge and attitudes influence these decisions, and where responsibility is often waived (Ristad et al. 2024). Partnering with the students, as well as having dedicated resources to promote inclusion from social and affirmative models of disability, can ensure that students gain access to their rights and generate inclusive higher education communities with strengthened disability knowledge and awareness.

The idea of empowering disabled students during their education may contradict the university system many of them face, which is built on ableist preconceptions (Dolmage 2017). Accommodation services alone do not seem to meet the political visions of inclusive higher education. Empowering disabled students can, therefore, be an important part of strengthening participation, inclusion, and retention in higher education. Rappaport (1987, p. 141) argues that "an organization that holds an empowerment

ideology will be better at finding and developing resources than one with a helper-helpee ideology." Examples of higher education adopting holistic approaches to inclusion can be found in the Italian university systems which focuses on developing relationships with students and their families, providing peer tutoring aimed to support social integration and academic development, and actively promoting student autonomy (Maggiolini and Molteni 2013). At Trinity University College in Ireland, the development of a cooperative movement led by disabled students embraces the empowerment ideology. 'The Trinity Ability Co-op' provides a platform for students, staff, and other university community stakeholders to promote and improve inclusion and inclusive practices at Trinity, which has enabled participation in the wider community (Malone et al. 2021). Although the current study believes the foundation of faculty allies facilitated student growth, solely relying on enthusiasts for empowering students presupposes faculty resources with an interest and skills to include students and will place inclusion in the hands of chances. This indicates a need for earmarked resources as well as specific policies anchored within each university to ensure disabled students' representation in inclusive work and partnerships with staff to achieve the goals of inclusion.

Building relationships is a central part of the PAR design (Cornish et al. 2023). Furthermore, at the heart of empowerment lies human interaction (Rappaport 1987; Zimmerman 2000). The fellowship that the students created worked as a catalyst for becoming a voice at the university. A sense of belonging is found to positively affect disabled students' success in higher education (Moriña and Biagiotti 2022). Providing arenas for disabled students to network and build social connections is thus important. However, promoting social belonging is neglected within universities (Shpigelman et al. 2022), and feelings of not fitting in are often the case for students experiencing disability (Hauschildt et al. 2021). The process of belonging in a student fellowship can relate to the microsystem in the ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (1994). The microsystem represents a person's direct and immediate surroundings, such as interactions within a family or a peer group, where facilitating and maintaining a person's development relies on the structure and content within the microsystem. However, it is not a given that people placed together experience a sense of community. Based on results from this study, this must instead be constructed, and its development supported. The students in this study connected through relating to each other's experiences, sharing a goal of changing the systems discriminating them, and, as such, constructed a fellowship based on trust and solidarity.

A culture of discriminating against disabled students and creating barriers to their equal participation in higher education was identified by the students in this study. This had a major impact on how the students viewed themselves in the context of higher education. In empowerment theory, this relates to Zimmerman's (2000, p. 46) term of psychological empowerment and the gaining of a 'critical awareness' when becoming aware of one's environment and competencies. Such developments can also be seen in the process of the students developing a strong sense of solidarity. Studying labor in society, sociologist Émile Durkheim distinguished between two types of solidarity—mechanical and organic solidarity (Durkheim 2018). While the latter views solidarity as the interdependent relationships we share in society for society to 'work', mechanical solidarity is constructed within groups by sharing similarities and a collective consciousness (Durkheim 2018). As such, the students' participation in the PAR study enabled a collective and critical consciousness to develop, which, in turn, generated yet another reorganization of their group into forming a student organization that can further shape awareness, a supportive fellowship, and a place for solidarity to grow.

Inclusion concerns all students. During recruitment, students with no personal experience of disability reached out as well as students with experience of culture and language barriers, which were assessed to be outside the scope of this study. However, future research should aspire to include a variety of students—also students without impairments—who can contribute valuable insights into how inclusion can commence. Most of the students in the PAR study had impairments which were not visible to others, which is in line

with surveys from Norwegian higher education (Hauschildt et al. 2021; SSB 2018). They were, however, conflicted about whether their impairment fell into a 'disability category'. Higher education is criticized for maintaining medical understandings to disability, affecting how students and staff address, think about, and value disability (Liasidou 2014; Nieminen 2021). Challenging medical and ableist structures requires a joint effort, not restricted to the context of disabled people. Still, discriminating structures require the empowerment of people from the mechanisms excluding them (Freire 2005; Lid 2023). The empowering process of experiencing meaning and change is related to the students' perceptions of their relevance in matters concerning inclusion, which was generated by and within their actions. Rappaport (1987) suggests that people are more likely to be empowered to participate in matters that mean something to them, where the solutions are created locally in contrast to pre-set general interventions. Through utilizing their own resources and competencies, students became agents of social justice. Rappaport (1981, p. 19) suggests that "niches" must be provided in the context where people spend their time to empower citizens and communities, enhancing their chances of controlling their lives. Based on experiences from the PAR study, students experiencing disability should be provided with opportunities for learning their rights and utilizing their personal experience and vigor to shaping inclusive higher education. Disabled people have specific rights to be included in decisions concerning themselves (United Nations 2006). Article 8 in the CRPD further places a responsibility on state parties to act on and implement measures to promote disability awareness and positive perceptions towards people living with disability, and to recognize their skills and abilities (United Nations 2006). For the students involved, the PAR study provided an opportunity, as such, to design a new identity. Universities have opportunities to develop niches where disabled students can practice and showcase their abilities in guided and safe environments.

5. Conclusions

This study proposes empowering processes and characteristics that should be considered in future research and inclusion work involving disabled students in higher education. The results indicate that empowerment is constructed within and dependent on multiple levels of interactions from micro to macro systems, and is highly dependent on the contextual atmosphere of such work. Uniting disabled students and faculty resources, and building affirmative relationships, both students-to-students and students-to-staff, was found to strongly promote student empowerment. The results point to empowerment as a series of processes that need to be actively promoted and supported through higher education. Aiming for inclusive higher education strongly indicates that adopting an empowerment ideology, instead of basing inclusion on a support model, has the potential to work as a catalyst for disabled students to learn, advocate, and access their fundamental rights. This suggests that targeted resources for inclusion work ought to be incorporated as a university policy.

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