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Anti-ableist pedagogies in higher education: A systems approach

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Abstract

Disabilities and neurodiversity are dominantly understood as something that challenges higher education rather than something that enriches it: ableist underpinnings characterize higher education despite policies of widened access. While earlier research has explored ideas such as 'inclusive pedagogies' and 'pedagogies of belonging', these important contributions have downplayed the marginalizing nature of pedagogy itself. In this conceptual study, we argue that non-ableist approaches to teaching are not sufficient in itself. We suggest a conceptual model for anti-ableist pedagogies to promote belonging and to challenge the exclusion and marginalization of disabled students. We have drawn on the ecological systems model by Bronfenbrenner to examine anti-ableist pedagogies as understood through the theory of systemic change. We provide a theory synthesis by drawing on earlier work on disability studies and anti-racist pedagogies: without systematic approaches to unpack and challenge the idea of a 'normal, able student' in pedagogical design and policies, 'pedagogies of belonging' fail to foster 'belonging' in a system that builds on exclusion. Our study will benefit both practitioners striving for more inclusive higher education as well as researchers aiming to better conceptualize the questions of belonging in the exclusive systems of higher education.

Practitioner Notes

1. Anti-ableist pedagogies aim to promote the inclusion and belonging of disabled students, and to challenge the exclusion of disabled students.
2. Anti-ableist pedagogies can be implemented in classroom settings through learning environment design by valuing diverse and disabled student voices.
3. At the faculty level, systemic approaches are needed to ensure safe and inclusive learning environments (e.g. staff professional development).
4. Broader communities beyond higher education, such as disability organizations, can be invited to design anti-ableist pedagogies.
5. To succeed, anti-ableist pedagogies need to be acknowledged in higher education policies.

Keywords

Anti-ableist pedagogies; ableism; inclusion; belonging; accessibility

Introduction

Who gets to belong in higher education? The answer to this question is in a constant flux in the 'anxious world' that this special issue considers. Mass higher education has opened its doors to diverse student populations as an academic degree has become a modern necessity in modern knowledge societies. The access of marginalized student groups such as disabled students[1] to higher education has thus been widened, opening new opportunities for wider populations to participate in the modern knowledge economies. It has been argued that in the post-digital knowledge economies, the role of diverse *human capabilities* is emphasized more than ever, as higher education needs to prepare future professionals for tasks that machines cannot complete. This idea offers novel ways of celebrating diverse, personal ways of academic expertise (Nieminen, 2022a). At the same time, higher education is increasingly harnessed for market-driven purposes with an overemphasis on certification, quick graduation and competition. This has led to performative approaches to the questions of inclusion (see e.g., Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). The questions of inclusion and exclusion in the context of higher education are therefore full of tensions.

We argue that it is the profound idea of 'abilities' that controls the inclusion of students in higher education. Disabilities and neurodiversity are commonly understood as deficits in one's studying, as personal tragedies that hinder one from productivity and timely graduation. Accommodation systems can be identified in most higher education institutions, and reasonable adjustments are widely provided in national legislation. While accommodation systems aim to ensure inclusion, overreliance on them reflects a performative approach to inclusion: disabled students are seen as the problem to be fixed, not inaccessible pedagogies, which is an ableist agenda (Nieminen, 2021). Research has indicated that disabled students often experience that they do not belong in higher education as full participants, but as outsiders, or as 'the Other', not as fully accepted members of academic communities (e.g., Dolmage, 2017; Pesonen et al., 2020; Shevlin et al., 2004). Disabled students and staff might both face ableist attitudes from other students and teachers alike (Mullins & Preyde, 2013). Thus, the ideas of 'ability' and 'standards' govern the processes of inclusion in higher education: they determine who is seen as valuable and worth belonging in academic communities.

In this conceptual study, we argue that within the deeply exclusionary and ableist context of academia, *non*-ableist approaches to pedagogy are not enough: what is needed is *anti*-ableism. We formulate the concept of *anti-ableist pedagogies*, building on earlier works by Podlucká (2020) and Penketh (2020). Anti-ableist pedagogies provide a general framework for analyzing and rethinking teaching from the viewpoint of academic ableism: the idea can be implemented in various contexts to disrupt the idea of an "ideal student" who gets to belong in higher education. Thus, our approach to the theme of the special issue is rather critical. 'Belonging' is commonly framed as a desirable outcome and 'non-belonging' as something to be avoided. Such conceptualizations undermine the politics of belonging: whether disabled people are invited to belong in higher education communities in the first place. Indeed, in our earlier work we have noted that it might be safer for disabled students *not* to belong in higher education (Nieminen & Pesonen, 2021). Pedagogies of belonging have often been unable to unpack the politics of

[1] We refer to 'disabled students' to emphasize the active role of higher education in 'disabling' students. This term reflects our overall stance to disabledness as a social, historical and political concept. In higher education, disabilities, illnesses, impairments, mental health issues and their complex intersections have been traditionally seen as adequate reasons for support. We challenge the dominance of the medical model of understanding such diversity by focusing on *disabling practices* rather than on categorizing students. Importantly, the term 'disabled students' considers the intersectional aspects of abledness as a gendered and racialized phenomenon, amongst others.

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abledness as a crucial defining factor for inclusion (see Podlucká, 2020). Through the concept of anti-ableist pedagogies, we can approach the topic of this special issue from two sides. First, we can discuss how pedagogical solutions could indeed promote disabled students' belonging. Second, we can analyze the profound, ableist barriers that higher education sets for the belonging of disabled students, and then challenge these barriers. Anti-ableist pedagogies aim not only to pave the way for belonging, but to prevent exclusion and marginalization. In other words, anti-ableist pedagogies design out barriers for belonging.

In practice, we conducted a literature synthesis (Jaakkola, 2020) for implementing anti-ableist pedagogies in higher education. Our aim is to synthesize relevant yet distinct literature from the fields of higher education, disability studies and antiracism. We argue that amidst decades of empirical data on disabled students' learning and inclusion in higher education settings, there is a need for a synthesizing framework to guide our thinking about how the profound issues for belonging could be addressed. While our focus is on disabledness, we understand the need for intersectional analyses; we understand disabledness not only as a medical-psychological phenomenon, but also one that is social, cultural and historical (see Annamma, Ferri, & Connor, 2018). To provide a systemic approach to anti-ableism, we frame our literature synthesis through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems approach, which we introduce below. Overall, we argue that if mass higher education aims to fulfill its purpose of producing future professionals in the unknown future with diverse skills and backgrounds, the deeply rooted idea of ability needs to be critically unpacked and challenged. As such, anti-ableist pedagogies enable a transformative stance toward the questions of learning and belonging; they enable both practical tools for more sustainable futures and novel conceptualizations for thinking about the questions of belonging in higher education (Podlucká, 2020).

A systems approach to anti-ableist pedagogies

Anti-ableist pedagogies offer a systemic approach to promoting belonging in higher education: without such systemic approaches, sustainable change might not be achieved (see Shevlin et al., 2004). We thus used Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model as a basis for a literature synthesis. First, we introduced the concept of ableism that has guided our endeavor. A part of our approach is that the conceptual framework we proposed is systematically transferable to any disciplinary context. We specifically want to avoid anti-ableist approaches that only remain within the boundaries of certain disciplines such as the arts (see Penketh, 2020). Instead, we aim for a general framework that can be applied in many higher education contexts and disciplines. While such future work needs to be rooted in specific contexts to be successful, we argue that first, a generic understanding of anti-ableism is needed. We do note that although the legislation and policies related to inclusion in higher education vary across countries, many of the issues discussed in our paper are universal. Our study thus provides a novel framework to think and talk about anti-ableist pedagogies, aiming to connect and engage teaching developers from various backgrounds. It is a concept for various actions to be considered when aiming to improve belonging in higher education.

Ableism

We first define our key concept, ableism. Ableism refers to the systemic project of valuing abilities and abledness over disabilities and disabledness (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019; Campbell, 2009; Goodley, 2014). Dolmage (2017), who has conceptualized ableism in the specific context of higher education, defines the term as follows:

> *instead of situating disability as bad and focusing on that stigma, [ableism] positively values able-bodiedness. In fact, ableism makes able-bodiedness and able-mindedness compulsory. [...] Ableism renders disability as abject, invisible, disposable, less than*

> *human, while able-bodiedness is represented as at once ideal, normal, and the mean or default*. (Dolmage, 2017, p. 7)

Ableism teaches us to understand ourselves through our bodily and cognitive abilities and to value them accordingly (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019; Dolmage, 2017). The valued modern citizen is cognitively able, and above all, is productive (Campbell, 2009). Goodley (2014) discusses ableism in knowledge societies in which citizens are steered toward "the neoliberal self [as] an able-bodied entrepreneurial entity" (p. 29). As disabled people cannot fit this image as ideal students in higher education, they are excluded as unfit and unproductive. Such exclusion might manifest in complete exclusion of disabled people from higher education; historically, disabled people have been vastly underrepresented in academia (e.g., Dolmage, 2017). However, ableism also takes place through inaccessible physical environments and teaching practices that *disable* students and actively - and often repeatedly - frame disabled students as 'the others', not full participants in higher education (Nieminen & Pesonen, 2021; Nieminen, 2022).

A societal *stigmatization* of disabledness and neurodiversity overshadows higher education: abnormality and unproductivity are recognized and devalued in higher education (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019). While such stigmatization might result in outright discrimination against disabled students (*disablism* through e.g., bullying, violence and denial of support; Dolmage, 2017), ableism enables critical analytical tools to understand the often hidden, systemic valuations of normality, productivity and abledness. A few of us stay productive for our whole lives, but even the most able of us might end up on crutches after sudden knee surgery and notice the importance of accessible design (e.g., elevators, wheelchair lanes). However, in such a situation, one rarely faces stigmatization. This is when the intersectional lens of ableism enables an in-depth analysis: how only certain conditions are strongly stigmatized in higher education (e.g., disabilities, mental health issues). Ableism and stigma evolve in certain socio-historical contexts, intertwining with gender and ethnicity (see e.g., Annamma et al., 2018; Parsons, Reichl, & Pedersen, 2017). Anti-ableist pedagogies are inherently intersectional as they seek to unpack and challenge the racialised and gendered nuances of disabling practices, amongst others.

Anti-ableism

Conversely, *anti-ableist pedagogies* disrupt ableism. Compared to ableism, anti-ableism is a less thoroughly conceptualized idea in educational research (see Penketh, 2020; Podlucká, 2020). Lalvani and Bacon's conceptualization in early education holds promise for academia as well:

> *Disrupting ableism can only be achieved if teachers position disability as a valued form of human diversity, create spaces for rethinking the constructs of disability and normalcy, and teach their students to embrace differences without stigmatizing them. (Lalvani & Bacon, 2018, p. 89)*

Anti-ableism in higher education is grounded in the humanist view that diversity should be celebrated (Moriña et al., 2020; Kattari, 2015) and not understood solely as a deficit (Penketh, 2020). While there is increasing awareness of inclusive practices (e.g., Universal Design for Learning) (see Nieminen & Pesonen, 2021; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021) and disability justice approaches (Kattari, 2015), systemic approaches to anti-ableist pedagogies are only evolving. Overall, we define anti-ableist pedagogies as an inherently systemic approach to both i) promoting the belonging of disabled students and ii) preventing the exclusion and marginalization of disabled students. These goals are overlapping yet distinct (Nieminen & Pesonen, 2021). The aim of anti-ableism is to disrupt the ideals of normalcy and productivity as often underlying teaching practices (Dolmage, 2017; Lalvani & Bacon, 2018).

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Yet while the concept of anti-ableist pedagogies is still evolving (Podlucká, 2020), many other items from the literature have paved the way for this idea. We are greatly inspired by the vast amount of literature on critical and anti-racist pedagogies in higher education and beyond (e.g., hooks, 1994; Kishimoto, 2018). Only certain types of learning, studying and knowing have been historically recognized as legitimate, and similarly, whose knowledge counts and who has access to academic knowledge have been questions raised by authors of earlier critical higher education studies. Of specific note, anti-racist pedagogies have framed teaching as a political project by questioning the traditional academic ways of knowing and doing. Anti-racism literature can complement anti-ableist work about vulnerability and risks while engaging in transformative pedagogies. Of particular interest to our endeavor is Kishimoto's (2018) formulation of anti-racism as (1) incorporating the topics of race and inequality into course content, (2) teaching from an anti-racist pedagogical approach, and (3) anti-racist work within the campus and linking our efforts to the surrounding community.

The ecological systems model

We have drawn on the ecological systems theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979) to conceptualize anti-ableist pedagogies. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) conceptualizes human development as occurring within multiple interdependent systems. As Bronfenbrenner notes, student learning and development are determined within the interaction of the students themselves and the multiple contexts around them, but also through their relationships and interconnections. The systems theory considers not only the characteristics of learners and the social relationships between them, but also the physical environments, societal factors and educational resources (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The original model divides human development into microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem; we have introduced these concepts in Table 1 and in detail in the sections that follow.

The ecological systems model enables us to focus on anti-ableist pedagogies as a systemic approach to social justice that needs to include yet reach beyond what we usually call 'pedagogy'. The systems model has been used before to understand school belonging as a multifaceted system (Allen et al., 2016), and this earlier study has indeed inspired our study. Allen and colleagues (2016) note in their review on belonging at the school level that research on belonging has focused on lower levels of systems, while the broader exo-, macro- and chronosystems have been understudied. Considerations of these levels help us to understand the entire ecological system of higher education in which disabled students are in the center.

The systemic approach to anti-ableist pedagogies

We used the systems model as an inspiration for sustainably implementing anti-ableist pedagogies. A brief elaboration of each of the systems is outlined in Table 1. Notably, in real life, the various systems are not simply nested but networked in complex ways (Neal & Neal, 2013). However, for our purposes, the original nested model is suitable for introducing the systemic nature of anti-ableist pedagogies. Next, we introduce how anti-ableist pedagogies could be implemented in each of the systems.

Table 1. An overview of the systemic approach to anti-ableist pedagogies.

	Definition	Contribution for anti-ableist pedagogies
Microsystem	Social interactions that most closely concern the individual (e.g., teachers, friends)	Social learning environments within learning environments
Mesosystem	Interactions between the microsystems (e.g., discussions between teachers)	Work in faculties and departments, staff professional development
Exosystem	Links between social settings that do not involve the individual	Broader communities beyond higher education
Macrosystem	Cultures and policies that influence the developing student, as well as the microsystems and mesosystems embedded in those policies	Socio-historical climate and higher educational policies
Chronosystem	Patterns over time; changing socio-historical and -political settings	Reframing the understanding of linear time as the ableist structures of time and 'time management'

Microsystem: Social relationships within learning environments

The microsystem refers to "pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). We addressed the microsystem through the social relationships that students experience within their physical, social and digital learning environments (see Nieminen & Pesonen, 2021). First, we noted that there is no such thing as an 'apolitical classroom', as any teaching session is always enacted within a certain socio-historical and socio-political context (Kishimoto, 2018). Overall, the aim of an anti-ableist approach to teaching is to disrupt the harmful overvaluation of normality and productivity in terms of students' bodies and minds. It shifts the focus from the ideals of effectivity, competition and productivity to pondering, diversity and indeed unproductivity, re-shifting the emphasis from learning *outcomes* to learning *processes*.

The microsystem promotes the importance of anti-ableist pedagogies in both face-to-face and online classroom situations. Pedagogy is thus understood as a relational, social, and deeply affective endeavor (Gravett, Taylor, & Fairchild, 2021). Earlier higher education literature has conceptualized pedagogies of care as an "emergent philosophy of education and feminized politics of knowledge co-created immanently by enabling educators and their students" (Motta

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& Bennett, 2018, p. 644). Similarly, inclusive learning environments have been designed to promote belonging through accessibility frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning. What anti-ableism adds to these important contributions is a critical stance (Podlucká, 2020). Anti-ableist pedagogies do not seek to complement the academic knowledge production processes that have thus far been largely inaccessible for disabled people, but to disrupt them. An anti-ableist teacher centers care and collective access in teaching, even though these values might run contrary to the overall values of higher education.

While feminist approaches have started to understand the sociomaterial, post-human aspects of pedagogies (e.g., Gravett et al., 2021), anti-ableist pedagogies center the question of *human* inclusion by acknowledging the socio-historical segregation of disabled people. This does not mean that non-human elements should be neglected (Naraian, 2020). For example, anti-ableist pedagogies need to consider the role of the accessibility of services, spaces and digital technologies, and the role of assistive technology in the questions of belonging (Naraian, 2020).

Anti-ableist pedagogies are an inherently communal project. Like anti-racist pedagogies, they disrupt the individualistic underpinning of higher education that promotes individual achievement, merit and competition, instead aiming to build classroom communities. As Kishimoto puts it in terms of anti-racist pedagogies: "A classroom becomes a trusting space where everyone (including the faculty) is invested in learning together." (p. 549). Anti-ableist pedagogies disrupt individualistic underpinnings of teaching and learning by facilitating room for communal learning and continuous peer feedback and support. The teachers' authority in such a teaching philosophy is decentered yet certainly not unimportant. The teacher is responsible for facilitating safe and challenging classroom environments in which meaningful learning can occur (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019, p. 32). It is crucial to provide accessibility to such environments in physical and social ways, and students should be consulted about whether learning environments are inclusive, safe and accessible (Nieminen & Pesonen, 2021). Through a communal approach, every student can participate and contribute as their own personal and diverse selves, as disabledness is framed not as a deficit but as a crucial lens to examine the world that the whole community can learn from.

In any of the human sciences, disability-related topics should be pushed from the margins into the mainstream of academic content. Here, Kishimoto's (2018, 545-546) suggestions for anti-racism offer valuable reflections for anti-ableist work (see also Annamma et al., 2018). Critical disability-related content needs to be included into the curriculum, course materials and syllabi. Almost any content in social sciences can be approached from the viewpoint of diversity by asking: what kind of knowledge has indeed been considered as *knowledge* in various disciplines (e.g., neurosciences, psychology, special education) and whether such knowledge has i) allowed disabled people to participate in such knowledge production, and ii) whether such knowledge contributes to ableist narratives about disabled people as lesser and unwanted (Tarvainen, 2019). Any coursework dealing with human data or social issues can be framed through the lens of diversity by offering students conceptual tools to uncover ableism.

An anti-ableist curriculum needs to bring disabilities and disabling conditions to the center of knowledge production and dissemination about human beings, breaking the ableist cycle of othering and marginalization. An anti-ableist curriculum constructs a counter-narrative that understands disabled people as active, agentic contributors to knowledge production about themselves (Tarvainen, 2019). This means valuing different kinds of bodies and minds, no matter what their imminent productive value is. It is the most crucial to implement anti-ableist content in areas such as special education that have a history in certain contexts in pushing disabled people into margins through knowledge that frames them as 'the others' and 'in need of curing and intervention' (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019).

A key disabling practice in higher education is *assessment* that has traditionally formed substantial barriers for the inclusion of disabled students (e.g., Hanafin et al., 2007). Considering that assessment is deemed to be so inaccessible that individual accommodation (e.g., extra time in exams) is administered in almost any higher education institution, it is surprising that assessment has been underemphasized when it comes to inclusive pedagogies (Nieminen 2022a, 2022b). Assessment needs to be centered in anti-ableist pedagogies. Traditionally, 'inclusive assessment' has relied on administering individual assessment accommodations. However, the accommodation model holds disabled students responsible for change, while the inaccessible and often exclusive underpinnings of assessment itself are left unchallenged (Nieminen, 2021). On the other hand, inclusive and accessible forms of assessment have been called for, yet their implementation in practice in higher education has thus far been scarce (Tai, Ajjawi, & Umarova, 2021). The lens of anti-ableism supplements the idea of 'inclusive assessment' by explicitly disrupting the positioning of disabled students as 'the others' in assessment. In practice, such assessment values the marginalized forms of knowledge (e.g., embodied knowledge) that have traditionally been seen as non-academic in assessment - and indeed as a hindrance that needs to be accommodated. Anti-ableist assessment values the diversity of students by enabling multiple forms of presentation of knowledge and skills. For example, diverse assessment practices such as portfolios, self- and peer-assessment, performances and other creative methods can be used to create anti-ableist counter-narratives in assessment. As per grading, anti-ableist pedagogies are based on disrupting the individualistic underpinnings of assessment. This means that an anti-ableist teacher might need to engage in 'ungrading' or other forms of making grading non-significant, as grading might distort the students' (and teachers'!) approaches to learning from 'communities' to 'competition' (Nieminen, 2022a).

Mesosystem: Work at faculties and departments, staff professional development

The mesosystem concerns the interconnections between the outer and inner systems. The mesosystem may make the microsystem stronger or weaker by its structures (see also Allen et al., 2016). The mesosystem includes organizational structures and support that promote formation of a safe and inclusive climate for students, their peers and higher education teaching and research personnel (Evans et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2021). Overall, anti-ableist work in the mesosystem ensures that inclusive pedagogies are institutionalized and sustained, rather than only implemented by some teachers already interested in such topics (Pesonen et al., 2021). Work in the mesosystem tackles systemic issues through systematic strategies, aiming for broader systemic change through work in the faculties and departments (Ngai et al., 2020).

Higher education institutions have ground rules and principles in place that can ensure that anti-ableist pedagogies can be practiced (Moriña & Carballo, 2017). The rules and regulations ensure that students are treated equally by their teachers, peers and other university staff (Evans et al., 2017). To improve performative practices toward anti-ableist actions, students can participate in the design of the strategy and accessible pedagogies at a systemic level (e.g., Healey & Healey, 2019). Often, only students without disabilities participate in planning inclusive pedagogies (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2019). When curriculum and syllabi work is taking place, the work groups in higher education need to make sure that diverse student representatives are participating (Wright et al., 2021). Importantly, such partnership programs need to be extended to include the co-design of reasonable adjustments and accommodations that have, thus far, been predominantly offered for disabled students rather than designed carefully *with* them (see Nieminen, 2022). As Mercer-Mapstone and colleagues (2019) remind us, it is important to ensure that marginalized students are heard in co-design processes, which calls for systemic, inclusive design of partnership programs. For example, disabled students could evaluate the inclusiveness and accessibility of such partnership programs.

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Curriculum is an important factor in fostering anti-ableist pedagogies. With an anti-ableist curriculum design, it is possible to 'design out' the barriers in learning that we might often take for granted. The very premises of teaching and assessment are tied to a specific idea of *time*, *communication* and *space*. For example, having visual elements (namely, written text) as the main form of communication in teaching and assessment construct significant barriers for many disabled students. Similarly, the predominant structure of time itself has been shown to be constructed to promote productivity rather than deeper learning. Bennett and Burke (2019) reconceptualized time in higher education as a mechanism to determine "who is included and who is recognized as 'capable' in different higher education contexts" (p. 913). Thus, the very structures of curriculum need to be critically evaluated from the viewpoint of accessibility and ableism. An anti-ableist curriculum ties together individual courses in a way that promotes flexibility and support, and enough time for deeper engagement and wandering with the coursework (promoting *unproductivity*). Such work calls for interprofessional design for accessibility at the broader curriculum level, calling for collaboration between curriculum developers, teachers, accessibility experts, and students, to name a few.

Anti-ableist topics and courses should be embedded and included in the curriculum that may make the microlevel actions stronger. Faculties that have compulsory courses for all their students about topics related to disabilities, diversity, discrimination and ableism have the potential to enhance anti-ableist pedagogies. For example, when designing a new curriculum such notions about separate courses should be brought forward, as this type of development of topics can make the aspects of microsystem stronger (see Allen et al., 2016).

Instead of singular workshops or professional development programs, continuous staff training about anti-ableist pedagogies needs to be fabricated into the very structures of teaching and learning (Moriña & Carballo, 2017). Investing time in collaboration between higher education teaching staff to share ideas, discuss obstacles and think about solutions has the potential to foster well-functioning anti-ableist pedagogies at the organizational level, which has an impact on the microlevel actors. Ongoing collaboration between higher education staff has the potential to increase individual capacity and commitment to the work at the higher education institution (Pesonen, Nieminen & Itkonen, in press). For instance, higher education teachers can feel that their opinion and thoughts are considered valuable and important when constant exchange of ideas and collaboration is taking place.

Exosystem: Broader communities

The exosystem is the surrounding services and communities around the higher education institution. It might not directly include the 'student' in the middle of the exosystem, but nevertheless it affects the belonging of this student in crucial ways (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Neal & Neal, 2013). There is a long list of such stakeholders for students in higher education, consisting of curriculum developers, policy makers, online learning designers, people working at the industry interface (e.g., placement coordinators), and disability center staff members, just to name a few. Although belonging work and anti-ableism can be addressed in several ways in the ecosystem, we merely focus on one key aspect: collaboration with disability organizations.

Such anti-ableist work consists of collaboration with disability organizations, activists and other stakeholders related to disability advocacy work. This way, the expert knowledge about belonging and anti-ableism *already out there* finds its way to higher education, recognized as valuable knowledge. The exosystem layer needs to be facilitated by higher education institutions to bring the various groups together (see Allen et al., 2016). Such collaboration has the potential to foster anti-ableist practices at other systems as well. For instance, higher education institutions could collaborate with disability organizations within the community, city, district or at the national level, to implement their input in the planning of anti-ableist services and pedagogies. Furthermore, representatives from disability organizations could be a valuable asset

in the curriculum work in the meso layer regarding both anti-ableist content and teaching practices.

Although such collaboration is important, it requires all the various disability organizations to be involved, as there can be various organizations and associations (e.g., for people with autism, hearing impaired, physical disabilities, ADHD, etc.). To enable intersectional approaches, many other organizations could be used in such collaboration as well. In such collaboration it is important to remember to find balance between the advocacy disability organizations often present and the actual implementation of such ideas that can be put into practice as anti-ableist pedagogies in higher education (Rajapaske et al., 2015). Higher education could take an even larger role in providing participatory knowledge about belonging and anti-ableism, together with the disability activists, local and international organizations and government agencies (see Lorenzo & Joubert, 2011). This kind of work widens the access to higher education for diverse student populations.

When it comes to anti-ableist *pedagogies*, we note that teaching and assessment practices can be directed to providing social good for communities beyond higher education. For example, authentic assessment projects conducted with disability organizations ensure that assessment tasks are not only provided for the teacher, but for the purpose of social justice (Nieminen, 2022a). Such an approach to pedagogy disrupts the usual idea of 'tasks' in higher education by letting diverse students produce meaningful tasks for social justice and thus take part in producing new academic knowledge, and by involving disability organizations as partners in such work to provide true 'authenticity'.

Macrosystem: Higher educational policies and socio-historical climates

The macrosystem considers "broader legislation and public policies at the federal level and includes factors such as regulations, guidelines, and government-driven initiatives" as well as "the historical (e.g., past events, climate, collective attitudes, and conditions) and cultural (e.g., language, norms, customs, beliefs) context." (Allen, 2016, p. 110). The macrosystem then surrounds all anti-ableist work: higher education institutions operate within society and for the purposes of society to provide a workforce and professionals for the knowledge economies. There is a lot we can learn from critical pedagogies and academic activism in how anti-ableist practices could not just address but explicitly *challenge* the political systems that govern education (see e.g., the seminal work by hooks, 1994). Anti-ableist activism is needed to disrupt the idea of a productive, cognitively able student: this calls for collective advocacy by students, teachers and other stakeholders for more inclusive futures of higher education (Kimball et al., 2016; Seale, 2017). This ultimately results in critical engagement with the capitalist ideologies that portray disabled people as unfit and unworthy to take part in modern knowledge societies (Dolmage, 2017).

Anti-ableist practices at the level of macrosystem are especially crucial from the viewpoint of access *to* higher education, and for access *in* higher education. For example, inclusive campus programs within higher education institutions could provide ongoing support and coaching for disabled students. If policy-level decisions are not made to widen this access for disabled people, anti-ableist pedagogies will remain within the boundaries of inaccessible classrooms and faculties that remain exclusive. Accessible slidesets will not be helpful for students who cannot make it to the classroom due to inaccessible architecture! Multiple levels of legislation and regulations can be outlined at the macrosystem level. For example, international agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) by the United Nations provides a fertile ground for belonging work. In Europe, the legislation by the European Union governs inclusion and accessibility work in EU countries. For example, The European Accessibility Act

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(2019) aims to ensure accessible services for all people through a common, international set of regulations. Of course, institution level work is needed to ensure that wider policies are implemented effectively in action (see e.g., Mullins & Preyde, 2013). Digital aspects of belonging are particularly important aspects of accessibility policies (Seale, Draffan, & Wald, 2010), especially in the post-pandemic world.

In addition to national and international policies and regulations, the macrosystem reminds us about the importance of wider socio-historical climates and attitudes about disabled people and higher education. For a long time, universities have served the elite. However, we are hopeful in terms of seeing the potential of higher education for providing broader public good for societies, of which inclusion and accessibility work is an excellent example of. In our times of growing inequality, the third purpose of universities in providing social good might be more important than ever; and within the context of society-wide ableism, such work might need to explicitly challenge the prevalent ideology of capitalism in how we conceptualize higher education in the first place. The mass higher education model provides novel opportunities for marginalized students to reach new opportunities in life and reinvent their identities in the knowledge societies (Moriña, 2017). Higher education institutions could take a more active role in media campaigns and disability activism together to promote change in broader public discourses about who belongs in higher education. Moreover, they could provide platforms for disabled people to take collective action in the knowledge production about themselves (Kimball et al., 2016), as academic research itself is a powerful act of inclusion politics and activism (Seale, 2017). Through participatory research, disabled students could provide counter-narratives about the so-called ideal student (Tarvainen, 2019), with the support of higher education institutes in promoting such storytelling for wider audiences.

Chronosystem: Changes over time - but whose time?

The chronosystem refers to the temporal aspect of belonging and how these ideas and their interplay with all the systems is developed and reflected differently over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Neal & Neal, 2013). Importantly, the changes in time occur to both the disabled student as well as to all the systems around them. Overall, the chronosystem challenges us to consider the temporal sustainability of anti-ableist pedagogies. If such pedagogies are abridged into teaching innovations that last for a semester or two, no sustainable change will occur. We highlight the importance of longitudinal approaches, bringing together literature from the fields of inclusion and systemic change. For example, Ngai and colleagues (2020) offer a novel departmental action team model that holds great promise for anti-ableist pedagogies.

While earlier analyses have considered the chronosystem through the idea of *linear*, objectively measured time, we have drawn on the relational conceptualization by Bennett and Burke (2017) instead. Their relational understanding sheds light on how ‘time’ - an idea that is taken for granted - is understood through individualistic and capitalist discourses that value quick graduation and performativity over deep reflection or slow maturation of academic thinking. Bennett and Burke’s work enabled an intriguing way of rethinking how students’ time is managed and governed during their study program. For example, they discuss how higher education institutions focus on teaching students ‘time management skills’ rather than on critically examining the accessibility issues concerning the very structures of time, deadlines and regulation related to teaching and learning. When it comes to ableism in particular, time is used to govern disabled students (Nieminen, 2022b). As time is understood through a linear, capitalist discourse, disabled students are systematically deemed to be ‘slow’ and ‘unfitting’ to the ableist structures of time. While it might be possible to responsibilize teachers to design flexible structures to support all students’ learning and studying, instead the disabled students were held responsible for managing their time. Nieminen (2022b) focused on assessment, which is an apt example of how individual practices such as ‘extra time’ are used to ‘fit’ disabled students in the time structures of higher education, rather than rethinking the system itself.

Disabled students need to *wait*, *fail* and *manage their time* to be included in higher education. Thus, the temporal changes at the chronosystem level occur *differently in different systems*. Anti-ableism then needs to both understand and disrupt the discriminative forms of time management.

The chronosystem needs to be included in future analyses of what exclusionary practices disabled students face in higher education and how they shape their subjectivity as future professionals in their field. Several important contributions have shed light on the disabling practices that students face as they proceed through their courses. Almog's (2018) study took a critical, longitudinal approach to the collective experiences of students with visual impairments to uncover social oppression. Almog identified the *compulsory abledness* that was systematically designed in teaching and assessment practices: over the course of one's studies, visual impairment was repeatedly constructed as something 'othered', 'different' and 'avoidable'. Furthermore, Taneja-Johansson's (2021) longitudinal study advised about the importance of support for disabled students while transitioning to higher education and to crucial *socioeconomic factors* in inclusion such as monetary issues and social and cultural capital. These 'external factors' are not stable but vary over time. Therefore, future studies could unpack whether and how higher education accumulates disabled students' social and cultural capital as compared with non-disabled students. Finally, Hewett and colleagues (2020) emphasized the importance of disabled students' *agency* as they progress in their studies. They demonstrate how both inclusive practices and individual adjustments can build upon inclusion over academic progression, but only if students are seen as agentic actors and not simply the receivers of such practices. The trajectories of disabled students' agency and how it varies over time and over various disabling practices offers an important lens for understanding anti-ableist pedagogies.

Conclusions

In this study, we have proposed a systemic approach for anti-ableist pedagogies for promoting all students' belonging in higher education. Our paper has expanded on earlier literature concerning pedagogies of care and mattering (e.g., Gravett et al., 2021; Motta & Bennett, 2018) through a critical stance toward the questions of belonging and abledness; it has synthesized relevant empirical studies to build a coherent framework for future research and pedagogy. Overall, the systemic approach to anti-ableism challenges us to operate within various levels of anti-ableism, such as classroom facilitation and broader policy conversations. This task might seem daunting, but systemic forms of exclusion and injustice cannot be tackled through one-sided approaches. Anti-ableism is never reducible into simple checklists or 'best practices': what is needed is a will to critically engage in revealing and challenging academic ableism (Dolmage, 2017; Podlucká, 2020). Our framework enables both an analysis of current landscapes of higher education, and inspiration for transformative practices for more inclusive futures.

Our conceptual study is a prologue for wider future research and practice initiatives on anti-ableist pedagogies. We raise several key themes that we see as being urgent and important for future work. First, more research is needed to address the exo-, macro- and chronosystem levels of anti-ableist pedagogies. Overall, these levels are less studied in belonging research than the lower levels that focus on the individual and on social interactions (Allen et al., 2016), which might have limited our understanding of the social, cultural and political aspects of "promoting belonging". Second, we have only presented a general, decontextualised idea of the systemic framework. Anti-ableist work only takes its specific shapes in certain socio-historical and -political contexts that need to be both addressed and challenged as our framework is implemented in practice. Third, future work is needed to unpack how the various systems in higher education interact with each other (cf. Neal & Neal, 2013). For example, how might teaching practices at the microsystem level operate inclusively with the mesosystem level activist work? We emphasize the importance of the chronosystem in future work to determine whether anti-ableist pedagogies are sustainable and systemic in the changing political tides of

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higher education. Fourth, future work could (and should) draw on intersectional approaches to belonging. While we have specifically focused on disabledness, more empirical and conceptual work is needed to shed light on the parallels between anti-ableism and anti-racism, for example (Annamma et al., 2018). Fifth, the digital aspects of belonging seem to offer particularly intriguing topics for anti-ableist work in the post-pandemic world: how does anti-ableism take place within and through digitally-mediated systems of higher education? (see e.g., Seale et al., 2010) Finally, future studies could also critically discuss issues related to disabilities in higher education in countries where higher education is still developing and less accessible to many.

As mass higher education continues to expand the diversity of the student population, a question could be asked: what is the value of such an institution if it cannot provide a sense of belonging for students from diverse backgrounds? Shallow, procedural forms of 'inclusion work' only create a false sense of inclusion (Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). We believe higher education institutes are in a key position in supporting the belonging of the diversity of students, and we have offered both theoretical and practical knowledge for such a quest. In fact, we see our critical approach to belonging as *radically hopeful*: we strongly believe that systemic changes toward belonging for all are possible and are already taking place, and moreover, we think that challenging the often taken-for-granted notions of normality and productivity benefit all students and teachers in higher education. Currently, knowledge about anti-ableist pedagogies exist. What is needed is the will to implement such pedagogies in practice.

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