

Project Accessibility Reflection Paper

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Foreword:

On February 18, 1995, I was born physically disabled. I was missing both of my thumbs, as well as the radius bone in both my wrists which causes my arms to bend inwards. I also wear a hearing aid as I am deaf in both ears. From the moment I was born, I was destined to be constantly judged based on my physical ability and appearance, always having to prove others wrong and having to fight for the same opportunities available to my able-bodied peers. This is the reality for millions of other children born with different disabilities. I began with this description to give you an understanding of how I, as the researcher, positioned myself in my research, having lived the experiences like that of the students you will soon read about. My education, much like that of many other students with disabilities, has been impacted by the presence of my physical disability, both in an educational, and social context. My experience, much like the experiences of other students with disabilities, tells the story of an institution that needs to adapt to support the student population that is typically left on the sidelines.

The topic of disability and inclusion is one that I hold close to my heart. Coming into this program I wanted to focus on research that pulled from my own experiences, as I worked to make a difference in the lives of others with disabilities. My studies focused on critical disability studies and pedagogy. To this end, I took courses towards fulfilling the requirements for the Environmental Sustainability Education Diploma. Through this diploma, the courses that I took, pertaining to education, helped me to understand the most effective methods for teaching others, which was invaluable in the preparation of my workshop. Although the diploma dealt with the topic of environmental education, I extrapolated the knowledge I received from these different courses to inspire my role as a facilitator for high school students with disabilities.

These past two years have been focused on my journey to create a workshop that I call *Project Accessibility*. I hope this workshop will someday be used in a wider scope, working alongside students with disabilities to help identify, and break down barriers to education so that one day; no student, regardless of gender, race, ability, religion, sexuality, or disability will feel excluded from maximizing the opportunities afford a quality education.

Abstract:

This research considers the experiences of seven students with physical disabilities navigating physical, education and social barriers in their respective schools located in south and central Ontario. Gathering first-hand experiences was my first step towards designing and establishing a pilot project centered around better integration of students with disabilities into high school. By working with students in grade 10-12, this research invited seven participants to identify the physical, social, and educational barriers they experienced, through two workshop sessions. I introduced disability justice as a useful concept for students to reflect on issues of ableism and used photovoice as a tool for students to share their thoughts and concerns about their school environments. Employing photovoice as a research method offers students a combination of photos and words to express their experiences and identify important issues. In my workshop, I had the participants take photos in and around their schools to document the barriers they encountered daily.

There were a variety of barriers highlighted by the students; some were obvious, such as stairs, lack of accessible washrooms, and poor maintenance of the landscape surrounding the school. While less obvious ones were the social and educational barriers such as a lack of access to sports clubs, interaction with peers, and a lack of opportunities to learn about disability in coursework. Throughout the research, students proposed recommendations such as; regular maintenance of elevators and landscape, reduced number of desks in classrooms, and more accessible clubs free of barriers, to name a few. These findings reflect a system in need of change; a system that, with the right amount of care and attention can open itself up to reach a wider body of people and allow them to receive the education they deserve.

Table of Contents:

1. List of Figures	Pg. 4
2. Introduction	Pg. 5
3. Intro to Photovoice	Pg. 15
4. Workshop	Pg. 17
5. Analysis of Research	Pg. 24
6. Summary of Results	Pg. 46
7. Conclusion	Pg. 49
8. Bibliography	Pg. 51

List of Figures:

Physical Barriers

Figure 1: Stairs	Pg. 25
Figure 2: Chairs/Desks	Pg. 27
Figure 3: Hallways	Pg. 29
Figure 4: Landscape	Pg. 31
Figure 5: Elevators/Accessible Washrooms	Pg. 33
Figure 6: Outdoor Accessibility	Pg. 35

Educational Barriers

Figure 7: Tables	Pg. 37
Figure 8: Sports Clubs	Pg. 49

Social Barriers

Figure 9: Inclusivity	Pg. 41
Figure 10: Social Events	Pg. 43
Figure 11 Curriculum	Pg. 45

Introduction

I will begin this reflection by explaining my positionality in relation to my research. Being a person with a disability meant that I would often face barriers unfathomable to my able-bodied peers. Coming into high school was like entering a foreign land. It was completely new to me, and I felt like I was on my own. To exacerbate this feeling of isolation, there were few opportunities to participate in the different social and educational aspects of school, as these activities were often focused on able-bodied students, while leaving behind those with disabilities who were unable to keep up due to a lack of services or assistance. The lack of access to clubs had a negative impact on my ability to socialize and make friends, and this led to difficulties integrating into the high school culture. From this experience came the idea for *Project Accessibility*, a workshop centered around improving the accessibility of schools for high school students with disabilities. For my research, I worked with seven students who attended schools from across the province. I met with the group multiple times, inviting them into a process of recognizing, documenting, and discussing barriers that led to the development of recommendations that each student could submit to their respective schools.

The experience of attending school and receiving a quality education is an important aspect of growing up. All children should have the right to attend schools, and to learn about a diverse range of topics in the hopes of having a fulfilling life and contribute in a meaningful way to society. However, it was not until April of 1985, that the right to an education was extended to Canadian children with disabilities with the revision of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, through Section 15 which now states:

Section 15 of the Charter makes it clear that “every individual in Canada – regardless of race, religion, national or ethnic origin, colour, sex, age or physical or mental disability –

is to be treated with the same respect, dignity and consideration” (Government of Canada, 2022) (Poirier & Goguen, 1986).

Unfortunately, while parents were pleased that their children were finally getting a legally entitled right to an education, the quality of this education was questionable. Students with disabilities were segregated from the rest of the student body, and therefore missed out on important social interactions with their so-called able-bodied peers. Compounding the inferior education, was the use of a different curriculum for students with disabilities, and as mentioned above, they often received their education in separate classrooms (Pivik, 2002). The resulting exclusion, experienced by those with disabilities, resulted in a lack of social time and interaction with their able-bodied peers. This reality had resulting social implications, for example, the development of social skills required to communicate with their peers was missing thus creating a sense of isolation for these students (Pivik, 2002). This gap in their education and socialization revealed the need for an inclusive classroom which encouraged and allowed everyone, regardless of their ability, to share their experiences and study alongside each other. In the last few decades, the expectations and demands of parents have grown, and with it the desire for a more equitable and mainstream level of education for their children, allowing both abled-bodied and children with disabilities to be exposed to one another and learn alongside each other under a common curriculum.

I divided this paper into multiple sections that will cover a range of topics such as the concept of photovoice, and how it was implemented to develop the data culminating from the workshop. I will also reflect on the workshop, the process undertaken to create it, the process that was undertaken to recruit participants for the research; including my method of recruitment, who I reached out to, and the incentives used to get participants, as well as the resulting data.

Next, the paper outlined the framework for creating my two presentations by applying a disability justice lens that would be used to drive the discussion with the students around barriers that they face in schools daily. Lastly, all the research that came from the students, including the photos, were compiled into a detailed section outlining the recommendations proposed by the students for consideration as a means of alleviating or preventing barriers to education for students with disabilities.

My motivation for doing this research was inspired by my first-hand experience of being a student with a disability in an able-bodied focused education system. Through my long-time connections to various organization such as Easter Seals and Friends of We Care, I have had the belief instilled in me about the importance of creating a space for everyone. As a result, the fundamental belief of inclusion has evolved into the creation of my workshop.

The original plan for the project was to create a framework for a peer-mentorship program that would pair grade 11-12 students with incoming grade 9 students to help them integrate into their new environment. However, over time I realized that to create a successful mentorship program, barriers to education needed to be addressed first. This factor, in addition to the rise of COVID-19 and the transition to online interactions, resulted in my project being transformed into something quite different.

My research focused on inclusive education for those with physical disabilities within the secondary school education system. It sought to explore the core barriers impacting an individual's education that were a result of a lack of awareness and various stigmas tied to the perception that able bodied people have of people with disabilities. Issues such as the historical treatment of people with disabilities, the lack of accessibility in the infrastructure of educative facilities, and the lack of understanding around the concept of disabilities and how it impacts

people, were just some of the many issues my research sought to tackle by engaging a group of students to discuss their perspectives on educational barriers.

Tackling the concept of inclusive education involves addressing social and physical barriers within schools and educational systems. By gaining first-hand perspectives from people with disabilities about the barriers they face, this research sought to gather the stories, experiences, and opinions from seven research participants. Opinion forming and the sharing of one's opinion is an important aspect of the human experience and is a step towards independence as individuals begin to speak up for themselves and self-advocate. However, not everyone is given this opportunity, and this is especially true for students with disabilities. To correct this injustice, my research, sought to provide students with disabilities a working knowledge of disability justice and tools to reflect on and to voice their opinions by offering their perspectives on the quality and accessibility of their education. I chose to use photovoice as the principal research tool, offering participants the opportunity to take images of the barriers they face and through these images share their ideas and experiences behind their images.

Photovoice employs a combination of photography and group discussion/workshops that invites participants to record and reflect on their daily lives. This research method offers participatory, visual-based methods for gathering perspectives and experiences (Lal, 2012). In conjunction with photovoice, during the group discussion, I introduced the concept of disability justice as a means of having the students explore intersecting issues that, when combined with a disability, results in barriers which are influenced by a variety of other factors. By applying a critical lens, when looking at barriers such as physical, social, and educational barriers, we were able to consider other contributing factors such as race, gender, sexuality, and others when identifying the barriers experienced by the workshop students.

Disability justice is a critical component of the framework that I used to develop the workshop. It is a movement that connects with all other key movements for justice and liberation from oppression (Ladau, 2022), and is often synonymous with terms such as disability rights and disability inclusion. Beginning as disability rights, the movement was seen as largely centering around white experiences, while ignoring other intersecting issues such as racism, sexism, etc. In response to this, in 2005, various disabled activists including Mia Mingus, Stacey Milbern, and others, joined together to address the exclusion of disability from these intersectional movements, and created a second wave, now known as disability Justice (Berne, 2021). The new wave of disability justice emerged in response to the growing need to address the absence of diverse backgrounds within the disability rights movement, to include such historically excluded groups such as women, people of colour, immigrants, and LGBTQ+-identifying people (Berne, 2021).

Until recently, the movement was organized and administered largely by white disabled people. However, with the new wave of disability justice, people of different races, genders, cultures, and economic backgrounds were now getting their voices heard. Disability justice became a useful tool in my research, as I explored other contributing factors to the barriers faced by students with disabilities.

The research structure I employed, provided a unique opportunity for high school students with disabilities to voice their opinions on the various physical, social, and educational barriers they faced in school. Unlike using other methods such as surveys, or even individual interviews, the group setting allowed the students to share their experiences with their peers, and by hearing from their peers they were able to build on what was said, thereby providing greater insight into issues pertaining to accessibility. In using this format, it also gave me the opportunity to

introduce the participants to new concepts such as disability justice, in an accessible way that they could easily relate to.

I developed the agenda for my workshops which would introduce students to these concepts, so that they may begin to practice disability justice beyond the workshop. By incorporating these concepts into the workshop framework, it allowed me to consider different barriers that manifest through intersectionality, around disability justice, and issues related to accessibility. Through a disability justice lens, barriers can be seen as being a barrier of two or more factors in addition to a disability, such as race, socio-economic status, gender, and sexual orientation. As a result, a disabled female identifying as a person of colour, faces not only ableism, but also racism, and sexism. This is an example of intersectionality, a term coined by the legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, which describes the experience of individuals who face multiple systems of oppression (Jampel, 2018). Introducing the concept of disability justice allowed me to expand the scope of my workshop to encompass other factors, beyond disabilities (i.e., sexism, racism, etc.) that contributed to the creation of barriers in the education system. This also allowed the participants to bring their own life experiences into the workshop so that the results would not be based on just one person, or one perspective.

The research gathering component of the experience involved pulling together seven participants where they were asked to consider and explore three types of barriers: physical, social, and educational. Physical barriers were represented by those found in the physical structures of schools. For example, the lack of wheelchair ramps, curb cuts, adequate washrooms space, narrow hallways, or any other barrier that makes a physical space inaccessible to those with disabilities. While social barriers were barriers that arise from the attitudes of able-bodied peers and teachers due to their lack of understanding of disabilities. For example, able-bodied

people may not have experience being around someone with a disability, and as a result, they may not know how to talk to those with a disability, thereby intentionally avoiding and excluding the disabled from participating in a social circle. Educational barriers were those barriers that prevented students with disabilities from participating in the curriculum, or extra-curricular activities such as clubs. For example, a school may not offer clubs (radio, yearbook, electronics, etc.) that are accessible to those with a disability, thus eliminating a disabled person from participating.

In terms of the final product, as referenced in my plan of study, the initial plan was to develop and deliver a mentorship program framework that would allow students from grade 10-12 to be paired with a grade 9 student with a disability in the hopes of assisting them in their successful transition into the high school environment. The idea would be to pair the disabled student with someone to navigate the early stages of high school life, providing someone to have lunches with, assistance in finding their way around the school and someone to connect with to be invited into a new circle of friends. This would allow them to create bonds and allow able-bodied and disabled students to be exposed to one another. However, to get to this stage, there are many barriers that exist within schools which needed to be addressed. Thus, the end goal shifted so that the final product would instead culminate in a pilot project centered around working with students in grade 10-12 to help identify and address the barriers and propose a series of recommendations to eliminate the barriers.

In developing my workshop, I considered the fact that due to the small sample size of my study that it could function as a pilot project and be used to test a format and approach which could then lead to a much broader and more extensive study in the future, looking at the barriers experienced by students with disabilities. The chosen research methodology that I used was

based on qualitative research, as interviews were identified as the main method of gathering data. Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world (Creswell, 2012). Unlike the distant nature of a paper based/electronic survey, choosing to do interviews presented me with a unique, and intimate approach to gathering the data. With interviews, it provided me with an opportunity to be brought up close and personal to those most impacted, and to hear the stories of those who have struggled with barriers that reduced the quality of their education. Utilizing a qualitative research methodology consists of accessing a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations including fieldnotes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self (Creswell, 2012). As a result, having the ability to conduct group interviews with students with disabilities, who are currently going through the education system, allows me, the interviewer, to situate myself within their world, seeing things as they do, and learning to understand the issues they face. However, as with any research method, there are both positive and negative elements to it, and interviews are no exception.

Interviews or in my case, workshops – whether face-to-face or virtually, provides both myself and the participants with more personal interaction than what surveys provide. The opportunity to meet with the participants, although virtually, gave me the opportunity to learn from their experiences which were different from my own. Having this perspective was not only useful to my research, but also helped me learn and grow as a person. As we had our discussions around accessibility and high school, I was reminded of my own experiences of exclusion, ranging from eating lunch on my own, to not having access to extracurricular activities like clubs. The stories told by the students reflected a system that has experienced very little change since I attended high school more than 8 years ago.

Regarding my workshop, because it centered on identifying barriers and developing recommendations that could be considered, I found it to be more beneficial to meet face-to-face, for a conversation-based approach as it allowed for the subtleties of body language to present itself in ways that surveys could not. For example, during the second session, upon showing the students the photo of a child with a disability being left out of an activity, it elicited an emotional response where the participants described being upset and angered by the photo, because of how it represented a similar lived experience. This response would not have been as evident if the research had been done through a survey. There are also more opportunities for the participants to share stories of their experiences in the face-to-face interview setting. Another example of this emerged during the first workshop, when the students were shown a photo of a crowded cafeteria and they were asked what barrier they thought it represented. One student replied that it looked like the ongoing nightmare they experience as they recalled the difficult experience of using a walker, wheelchair, or other accessibility device to navigate heavily populated spaces filled with large crowds of people.

There is also a matter of focus. In an interview or in my case a workshop, the interviewer/facilitator has full control over the interview and can keep the participants on track. However, with surveys, they are usually completed at the convenience of the participant, who can be distracted by other things in the moment, such as texting, reading emails, web surfing, and daily life distractions, that limit the chances for completing the survey in a timely manner, with the required focus.

However, conducting the workshops, in contrast to other research-gathering methods, also has its downsides. The results are largely dependent on the ability of the participants to elucidate their thoughts into coherent words. For the workshop to go smoothly, I, as the facilitator, needed

to be able to comfortably guide the session where I wanted it to go, making sure that all the relevant points for the research were touched upon. If I was not able to do this, then the results would have been lacking.

Another issue was the emergence of my biases. As a person with a disability, I had to be mindful to ensure that my viewpoint on the barriers and how I addressed them, would not interfere with the dialogue of the participants. Another downside was the limited sample size. As I was the only interviewer, there was a limit to the number of people that one person could interview in the time available for the research project. Thus, the process that was undertaken can be considered a pilot study to test out the process as a means of identifying any challenges that can be corrected before expanding the research to encompass a much broader and more comprehensive sample size.

One issue faced by the workshop format in relation to the use of photovoice was that it relied upon the ability of the participants to be thoughtful and take obvious and not so obvious photos that could be discussed. In taking the photos, the goal was for the students to analyze their school for barriers that stood out as obvious, such as, stairs, narrow hallways, and inaccessible washrooms, while also taking photos that were less commonly recognized as a barrier, such as the absence of accessible sports teams, or the lack of topics relating to disability within the curriculum. Care was taken to ensure that the photos did not identify students and/or specific schools to maintain confidentiality. The intent of the photos that were taken by the students using their phones, was for them to be representative of the barriers that they faced in school, as a means of discussing the barriers and possible recommendations to mitigate them.

Introduction to Photovoice

The workshop utilized the research method of photovoice for gathering data. Photovoice is a participatory research method that capitalizes on the spirit of the adage, “a picture is worth a thousand words” (Newman, 2009). Photovoice employs a combination of photography and group work to provide people with an opportunity to record and reflect on their daily lives. Many researchers find value in this form of research as it allows them to adopt participatory, visual-based methods for gaining information (Lal, 2012). It puts cameras in the hands of “everyday” people and allows the participants to take on the role of researchers. This gives them the opportunity to share their point of view and act as advocates for themselves and others within their community (Newman, 2009). I employed this method as the students were encouraged to use their cameras to capture photos of the barriers they faced on a day-to-day basis within their schools, and then discuss their thoughts pertaining to the barriers with their peers in a facilitated group workshop.

In terms of its evolution, photovoice is a more recently developed method of research that utilizes a combination of photos and words. Its origins began around 1994, with researchers Caroline Wang, Mary Ann Burris, and other colleagues, working in China’s Yunnan province with rural village women. The purpose of their research was to provide women who were often treated as invisible, with a means of voicing what was needed to improve the conditions of their communities (López et al., 2005). Adopting the use of photovoice formed the foundation of my workshop, as a method of engaging and gathering different perspectives of high school students. It offered students with disabilities, who face a wide variety of barriers throughout their day, a means to share their experiences through images. Of course, photovoice does privilege sight, so it has its limitations with respect to a person who does not have sight. By putting the camera in

the hands of those affected and letting them capture the issues from their perspective, images that convey barriers that negatively impact their education become very personal and real.

Photovoice thereby provides a visual representation of chosen images by the photographer, who is also a participant, and it is these images that represent the gaze or view of the barriers experienced by the photographer, paired with the dialogue that emerges from the workshops. Unlike reading about an issue, photovoice lets the audience see a visual representation of the issue, thus offering more of a narrative that the image would invoke by framing the issue in a more visual way to convey important experiences with the audience. Another benefit is the discussion that takes place upon viewing the photos in a group setting. This allows others to hear different viewpoints, which can lead to a more in-depth discussion on issues as participants share and learn from the experiences of others. One issue that can arise when using photovoice, if the participants' level of maturity is not taken into consideration, when the process is explained, is misinterpreting the instructions, resulting in the photos not being applicable to the goals or focus of the workshop.

Workshop

The workshop that was developed was titled “Project Accessibility”. It was based on a process undertaken by Newman, where he describes the steps taken to establish a workshop that implemented the research method of photovoice. To this end, the ideas found in his process (Newman, 2009) were emulated as a means of developing my workshop, which was focused on addressing the physical, social, and educational barriers faced by students with disabilities in secondary school.

To create the workshop, my first step was to identify the community that would be used to locate participants, that being students with disabilities in Grade 10-12, who face a variety of barriers to their education. Being a person with a disability, I had my own experiences when it came to educational barriers. However, it was important to work with students who were currently going through high school, to learn about the barriers they faced. To this end, organizations such as Easter Seals Ontario, and Friends of We Care, were a good starting point as their clients fit the criteria of the participants needed for the workshop, as these organizations were charitable organizations that provided financial support to families of children with disabilities.

As a former ambassador and ongoing volunteer for both organizations, I developed connections with both charities which proved extremely useful when it came to identifying potential participants for the research project. In addition, more participants were found by reaching out to contacts within different schoolboards. Once I obtained the number of desired participants, the next step was to create the presentations that would be used for my workshop.

The workshop format was designed to consist of two separate presentations. The first was to act as an introduction to the overall project and introduce concepts to be used as well as provide

the required instructions on what and how to take the photos. The second workshop was to be used to discuss the photos and identify potential barriers as well as to propose recommendations to eliminate the barriers.

The introductory presentation, conducted on May 13th, outlined who I was, why the participants had been approached, and what they would be doing as part of the research. It then set the groundwork for understanding the goal of the workshop. The participants were provided with a history of photovoice, as well as an understanding of disability justice, which was an important element of the research. They were then given clear instructions on what they were to be photographing for the workshop and provided time to ask any questions.

Out of the eight that agreed to participate, only seven attended both workshops. Due to schedules, three introductory sessions were held with five attending on May 13, 2022, and two attending a second session on May 17th, and a third one taking part on May 26th. With each successive workshop, slight revisions were made to how the presentation was delivered, based on the experiences learned from the prior session(s). The introductory workshops went smoothly as I introduced myself and had the participants do the same. We reviewed the concept of photovoice; what it was, and how they would use it in the workshop. The concept of disability justice was also introduced by looking at what it was, and its importance in not only the workshop, but in life as well.

After the first presentation, the students were instructed on how to capture photos of different barriers they saw in their school day. To do this effectively, the research methodology – photovoice was used as a means of providing the participants with a means of voicing their opinions about the barriers they saw that negatively impacted their education. Once the

participants had submitted their photos, the group reconvened for the second of two workshops where we explored the photos and discussed the barriers and potential solutions.

The second workshop was conducted on June 6th and 8th. Due to scheduling conflicts with the participants, the workshop had to be run on two separate days with the first session having three participants, and the second session having four. The presentation started with a review of the research project, disability justice, the types of barriers, along with a discussion on key questions to think about while we reviewed the submitted photos. We then moved on to the data assessment or photovoice section of the workshop. For this section the submitted photos were divided into the three types of barriers: physical, social, and educational. The photos were then categorized within each barrier and arranged into themes.

They included the follows:

1. Physical
 - a. Stairs
 - b. Chairs/Desks
 - c. Hallways
 - d. Landscape
 - e. Elevators/Accessible Washrooms
 - f. Outdoor Accessibility
2. Educational
 - a. Tables
 - b. Sports Clubs
3. Social
 - a. Social Events
 - b. Inclusivity
 - c. Curriculum

For each theme, the participants were asked what they saw in each photo and were then prompted to share any stories or experiences they may have had related to the photograph. Another point of discussion was identifying the actual barrier the photo represented. The students then followed up by proposing recommendations for removing the barrier. Throughout the discussion, they were prompted to think about how the different barriers impacted their ability to socialize with their peers. In addition, they were asked about the feelings they had that emanated from viewing the photos that typically segregated students with disabilities from the mainstream, whether intentional or unintentional.

A pilot project, by design, is intended to be a learning process where the researcher tests out different trials and approaches. Improvements that are identified throughout the process are then made so that the pilot can then be implemented and delivered on a much larger scale. This workshop was no different. With regards to the workshop prep, when working with a group of people there are challenges that tend to arise. Getting people to commit to doing the workshop can be difficult which creates a challenge of getting an adequate sample size. Many are not responsive to emails, others may have a busy schedule, while some just may not be interested. Relying on others can also be a challenge, especially if the process is not started well in advance of the date published for the workshop. As a result, I found that I was constantly shifting my intended date for the workshop to accommodate the lack of participants. To accommodate a larger group moving forward, it will be important to start well in advance of a target date for delivering the workshop. Furthermore, having a more direct connection with participants or being sponsored or endorsed by a larger entity, such as a specific school board, would improve the participation rate. Finally, while you may get commitment from several people to take part,

the actual number at the end of the process will be short of the total number that committed. As a result, this must be factored into the research sample size targets.

By the end of April, three out of the seven desired participants had committed to taking part in the workshops, which was to be delivered on May 4th, and 11th. Even with a cash incentive, it was still difficult to get the desired number of participants to make the results meaningful. As a result of the lack of participants, the workshop was delayed to May 13th. By the end of the next week, commitments from eight participants had been secured for the workshop.

Another challenge that emerged was scheduling a date for the workshop. With a target of seven participants, it was challenging to find dates that accommodated everyone. The introductory session, as a result, had to be conducted over three separate sessions to accommodate the schedules of all involved. Doing this, however, allowed the opportunity for me to refine and improve the delivery of each subsequent session. It also spoke to the importance of having commitments from a number larger than the target test size to allow for the fact that some may not be able to attend due to conflicts in schedule.

There was also a challenge when it came to finding the appropriate level of language for the presentation. If the language was too simple, it could come off as condescending, but if the language was too complex, then the students could become lost, or bored as they would not understand what they were being asked to do. As the audience was represented by high school students, a means of presenting the research to the students in an accessible and engaging way appropriate to their level was required. Holding three sessions did allow for improvements to be made to the presentation in terms of the language used, which did not negatively impact the final research data.

Overall, the workshop went smoothly, the online meeting room was opened 15 minutes before the start to ensure that everything was ready, and students had access to the room if they signed on early. When it was time to start, the participants were admitted into the meeting, with four participants ready at the proposed start time and a fifth participant joining mid presentation. There were some challenges with the first session, as the additional task of running the online meeting was a distraction to giving the presentation, as the presenter had to keep an eye on the waiting room for latecomers. A way to mitigate this issue in the future would be to assign a second researcher as co-host and have them admit people to the meeting as needed and manage the meeting technology, allowing the presenter to focus on the presentation.

Another challenge that I faced was introducing new concepts to the students. The students were engaged for much of the presentation. However, once we got to the section on disability justice, it was clear that the topic was too complex for them, and they were not at a maturity level required to comprehend the concept in the time provided to introduce the concept. This was noticeable as they were unsure of how to respond to some of the questions asked. For example, at the conclusion of the presentation the students were asked, “how will disability justice play a role in your life in the future?” Having just been introduced to the topic a few minutes earlier, meant that they did not have enough time to absorb and properly think about the question and understand the implications that disability justice can have on their lives. For them to think about disability justice, they would have to fully understand its history and various events leading up to the social movement. As it stood, we did not have this kind of time, nor was this the time-commitment that the participants had agreed to. As such, it would have been more effective to further simplify the information around disability justice and its history, and maybe add some brief questions and examples for discussion purposes within the presentation to help them

understand the topic better. Unfortunately, if not done properly, this could also increase the duration of the workshop, turning it into more of a lecture, which was not the intention. It was also difficult to explain how to think about disability justice when taking photos as they did not have any prior experience with the term. Throughout the discussions, I observed that as one student talked about a particular barrier, then the other students followed up by voicing similar sentiments as they all had similar experiences with similar barriers. For example, when going through the photos showing was a crowded cafeteria, the students collectively described the photo as a nightmare as cafeterias are very hard to navigate when using a walker or wheelchair.

Analysis of Research:

For this paper, the term mobility devices will be used to encompass wheelchairs, walkers, canes, crutches, or any other assistive device used by those with physical disabilities to move around. It is also important to note that although the photos are divided into three distinct categories, that being; physical, social, and educational barriers, there is still a sense of fluidity between the categories resulting in photos being representative of multiple categories depending upon the perspective of the person viewing the photo. For example, although hallways can be representative of a physical barrier, due to how narrow they are, they can also be considered a social barrier as well, due to the negative impact it can have on students who use mobility devices, and their inability to socialize between classes because of being segregated away from their friends while taking elevators.

For the analysis, the discussion will start with what the students said about each group of photos, followed by the student's recommendations. Finally, a disability justice lens will be used to examine the question, "what if it was a barrier that impacted able-bodied students."

Physical Barriers



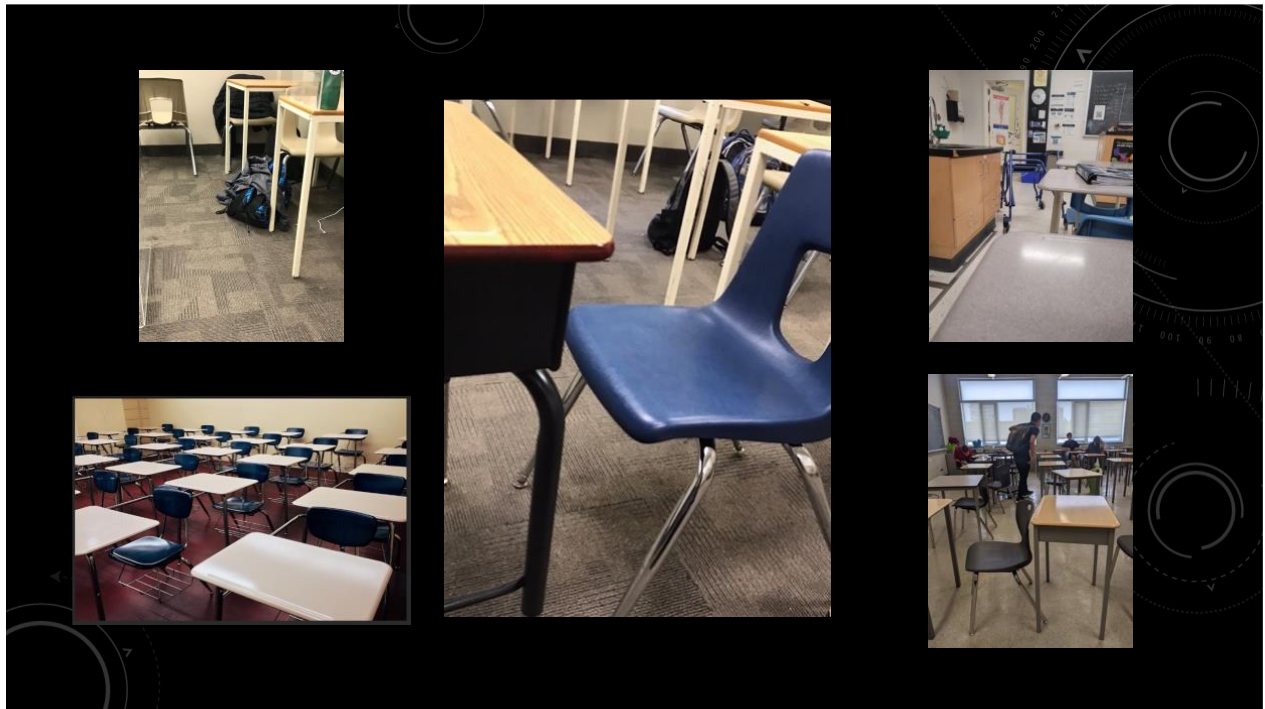
Stairs

In the first group of photos, the barrier identified and discussed was stairs. Although the students did not have much to say about stairs due to their self-explanatory nature, they did comment on how stairs represent a wall to those with mobility devices. Some of the students talked about the policies around fire drills which are complicated by the presence of stairs. Regarding the fire alarm protocol, one student said that if they are upstairs, they are required to wait at the top of the stairs for someone to come and get them and either carry them downstairs, or help them walk down if they are able, as they are not allowed to use the elevator during a fire drill. This can be very dangerous for both the student, as well as the person having to help them, as it puts them in unnecessary harm. While observing the discussion of fire drills, it is noteworthy that the protocols place a considerable amount of responsibility on saving a person's

life in the hands of another to the point where that person may have to choose their life over another.

For recommendations, the students proposed building more ramps in areas where there are ledges or replace stairs where there are only a few steps. They also discussed the importance of making the ramps long enough so that they are not too steep. They also suggested proper elevator maintenance to ensure that the elevators are always functioning properly. With respect to elevators, I observed the inconsistency in elevator use with high rise buildings and schools where students in wheelchairs are not permitted to use an elevator to evacuate a second floor in a school but those in high rises are able to access the elevators. Rather than wait to be helped down, protocols in schools should be adjusted to allow impaired individuals an option of taking an elevator.

What if the roles were reversed and able-bodied students were unable to access upper floors of the school due to the stairs being blocked? This would shut down the school as it would make it difficult for students to get to and from classes located on the upper levels of the school. The school would then be highly motivated to make a change to remove the barrier as many students would be impacted. Unfortunately, for those with disabilities, they are not in the majority, and schools lack the motivation to make the necessary changes in a timely manner, or at all. This is particularly noticeable when elevators go un-serviced for extended periods of time.



Chairs/Desks

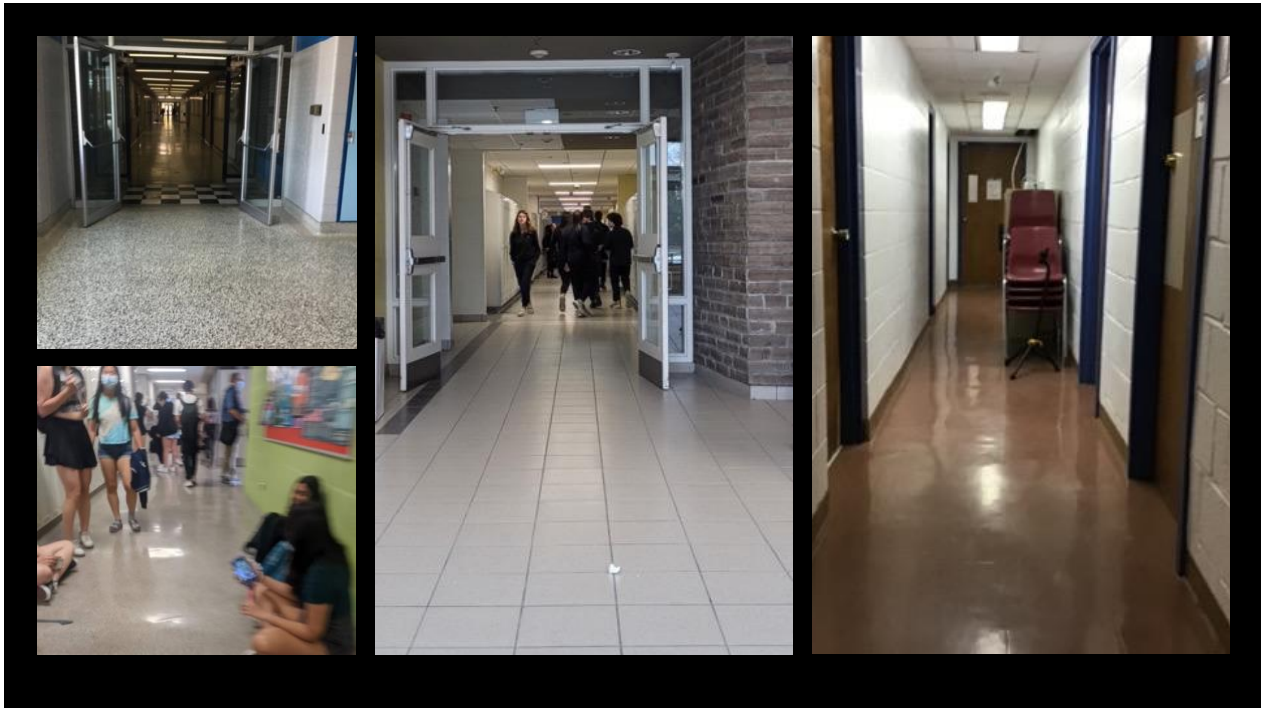
The next subset within physical barriers was chairs/desks. During the conversation, I observed an interesting discussion regarding COVID-19. During COVID-19, students did not have access to their lockers, which as a result, meant that they had to keep their stuff under their desk. With classrooms already tightly packed with desks, having things on the floor in addition to the number of desks in the classroom, made it that more difficult for students with mobility devices to navigate their classroom.

Another complication that students using mobilities devices commented on was the desk-chair combo. These structures make it difficult to navigate around the classroom due to the desk and chair being fused together. To get around the desk/chair combo, the whole thing needs to be moved out of the way, which, as you can imagine, would be very difficult for someone using a wheelchair or walker. Another issue observed during the discussions was the seating arrangement. Typically, students want to be able to sit with their friends, however, for those who

use mobility devices, they are restricted as to where they can sit in the classroom, which is often to the side which is outside the chair configuration. The current arrangement of desks can have a significant impact on a disabled persons ability to socialize with their peers as they are segregated upon entering a room, which can lead to a sense of isolation that can impact the quality of their education.

Students proposed reducing the number of chairs in the classrooms allowing for easier navigation, as well as revising the way the desks are organized to allow for students with mobility devices to choose more freely where they wish to sit. Another recommendation was the construction of cubbies for storage within a classroom to reduce clutter on the floor, making it easier for those with mobility devices to move around. A number of these recommendations would benefit all students and not just those with disabilities.

The students opined, imagine being a visible minority, in a classroom where you are segregated. What issues might arise from this? Do you think individuals would feel welcomed in the classroom or feel that they could participate freely? If accessibility was better understood, and upheld, then the schools would be able to do a better job of creating a more welcoming space for those with disabilities.



Hallways

In terms of the hallways, the students described situations that created barriers that some might not think about. First, the obvious, which is, it can be difficult for those with mobility devices to move through a crowded hallway. Second, hallways create a sense of social isolation. The students expressed their frustrations when they pointed out that you have just finished class and want to chat with your friends in the hallway. While able-bodied people can stand off to the side, or walk beside their friends while chatting, it is much harder for someone with a mobility device to do this, as their device takes up too much space, and is an impediment to the traffic flow and thus the possibility of running into someone and injuring them is real. Another issue that comes with the narrow hallways is that students invariably run into someone and are then held accountable even if it was an accident. Situations like these can create social barriers in addition to the physical barriers and thus lead to social isolation for students with disabilities.

Navigating the narrow hallways with a mobility device can also result in the student being late for classes due to the traffic blocking their way, which then places them under peer scrutiny as they constantly enter the classroom late.

Some of the students recommended that some of the doors in the hallways (excluding fire doors) be opened or removed to make it easier for students with mobility devices to get to where they need to go. Another recommendation was to let them leave class a few minutes early, without asking, to get to their next class, or to go to their locker to get ready to go home.

Looking at this issue from another perspective; what if the hallways were blocked so that able-bodied students were unable to reach their classes on time, or at all? How would they reach their classrooms and how would teachers respond to the constant interruptions to their classes? If something like this happened, the school would likely take action to correct this issue.



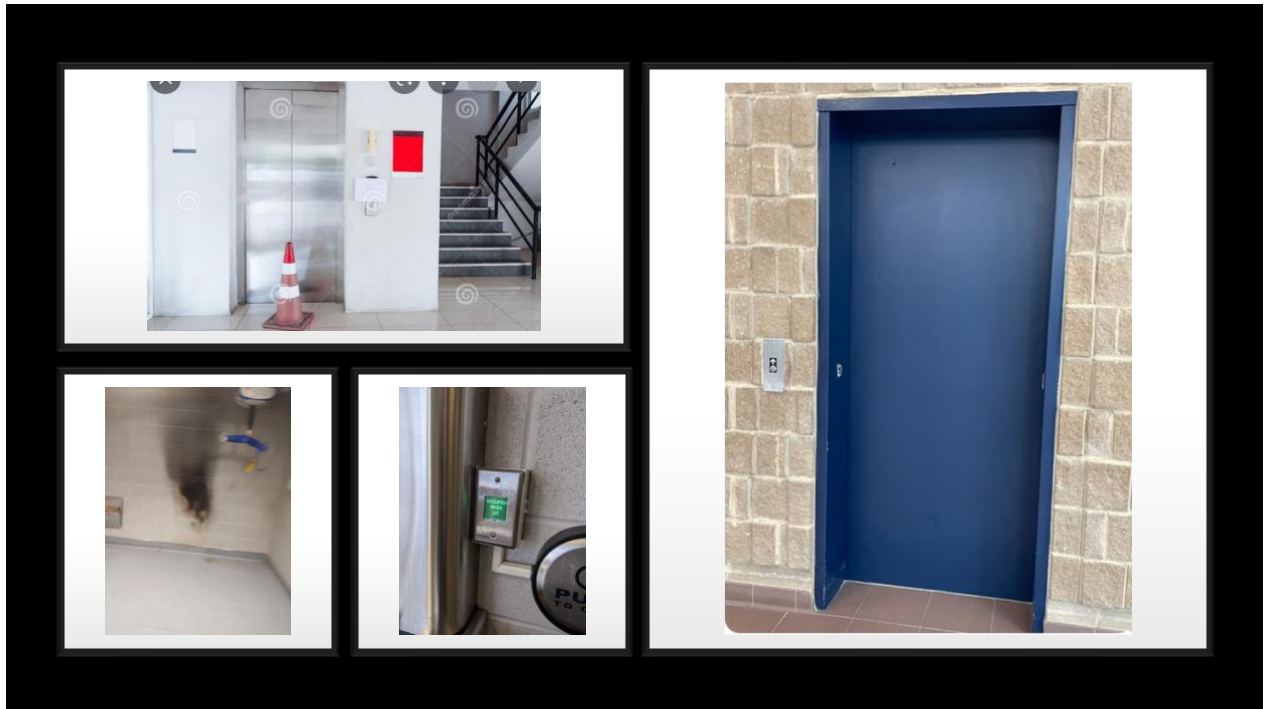
Landscape

The next subsets of photos we looked at pertained to landscape. Included in these pictures was a pothole, grass surface, a fence, the lip of a sidewalk, and a rocky surface. In terms of the landscape, students had many things to say about the perceived barriers. One of the common barriers that you often find around a school was gravel. This surface material can make it extremely difficult and dangerous (tipping over) for those with mobility devices to move across. The presence of grass also acts as a barrier as it can also make it hard to move across. These barriers not only create a physical wall, but they also have an impact on the ability to socialize with peers as students are often stuck on the pavement, or inside the school, while watching their friends hang out and socialize in the field which is inaccessible via these hard to navigate surfaces. An interesting point highlighted by the students was the lack of consideration school boards have for the disabled. The photo showing a pothole outside of the school was indicative of their lack of consideration as they noted that it was easy for their mobility devices to get stuck

in the potholes, causing them to trip, or be flung out of their chairs. One student commented on the fact that they were knocked out of their wheelchair when a wheel got caught in a pothole. When you compare this issue to something like ice in the wintertime, you can immediately see a distinction in how the school prioritizes how certain issues are dealt with, and how quickly. In the wintertime, when the ground freezes and ice forms, it becomes a priority as it is a safety issue for the school. However, in the case of the pothole, as it is only seen to impact a few, it is often overlooked, even though those who can become injured from the pothole tend to have more severe ramifications should a fall occur.

The students recommended that schools observe these issues more closely and deal with them in a timelier manner as everyone has the right to socialize with their peers. They also suggested using more concrete, or plastic platforms for easier travel.

Looking at this issue from a different perspective; What if there was a teacher with a physical disability that used a mobility device and was unable to move around the school grounds due to the barriers presented by the landscape? This would likely be seen as workplace discrimination and would force the school to make changes to accommodate the employee. Why can't these changes be done for students with disabilities to improve the quality of their education?



Elevators/Accessible Washrooms

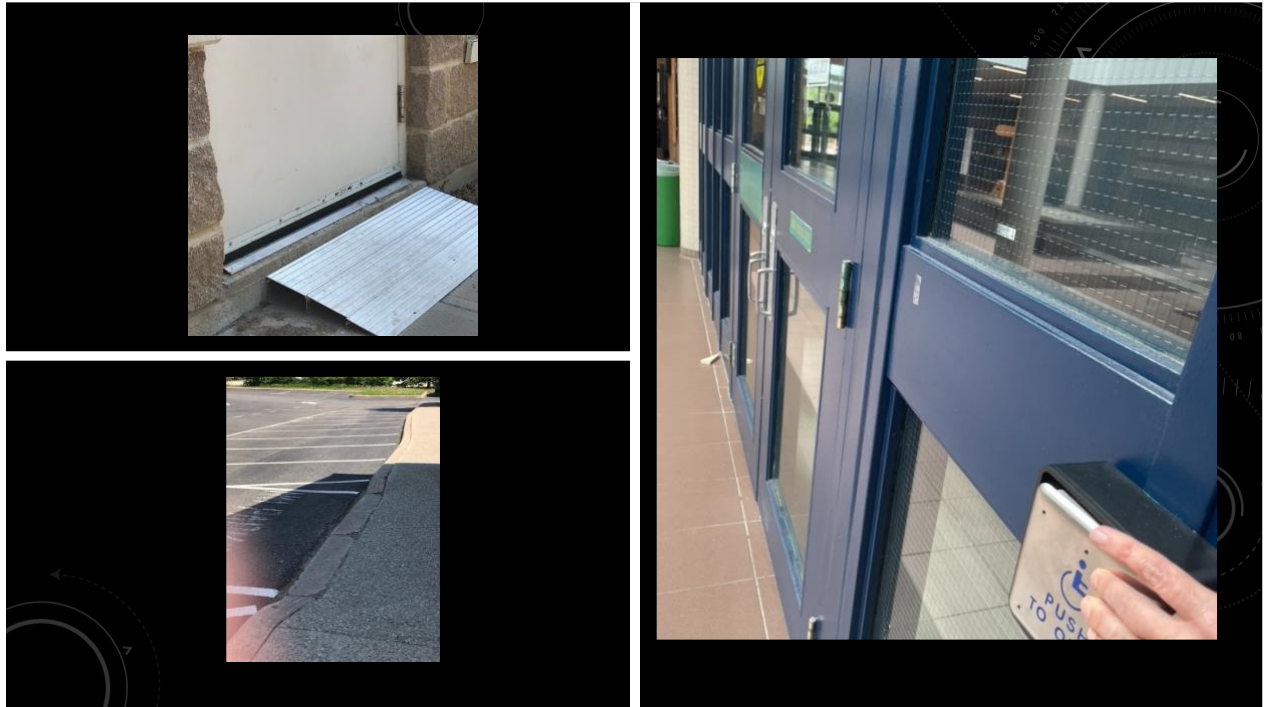
Next, the group looked at photos of elevators and accessible washrooms. The students talked about how elevators and accessible washrooms are typically seen as a benefit, until they are not functioning properly, or they are being used by someone without a disability. The students expressed frustrations when they are unable to use a washroom or elevator due to it being out of order or being used by someone who did not require the use of the facility. For example, the photo on the bottom left shows a burn mark on a wall of a disability washroom which remained out of order for 4 weeks. As a result, those with mobility devices did not have access to a functioning accessible washroom for this period. A similar delay for common washrooms would have been unacceptable.

With regards to elevators, the students perceived them more than being a physical barrier. One student said that the elevators in their school are only big enough for one student and maybe a second, usually an educational assistant (EA). This results in the student being socially isolated

from their peers as they are missing out on an ability to interact with their friends between classes.

The students recommended that elevators and accessible washrooms be maintained more regularly, as elevators tend to break down if not properly maintained. Issues like these can make it difficult for students to participate in the curriculum.

The student commented on what if the barriers impacted able-bodied students? What if the stairs were blocked, at one end of the building forcing the students to the other end of the school to access the second floor? This would be an intolerable situation that would quickly find a remedy. Why not address issues around out of service accessible washrooms or elevators to allow those with disabilities to be a part of the community? Why should students with disabilities have to tolerate issues that only appear to impact them while barriers impacting able-bodied students are seen to be resolved at a much quicker rate.



Outdoor Accessibility

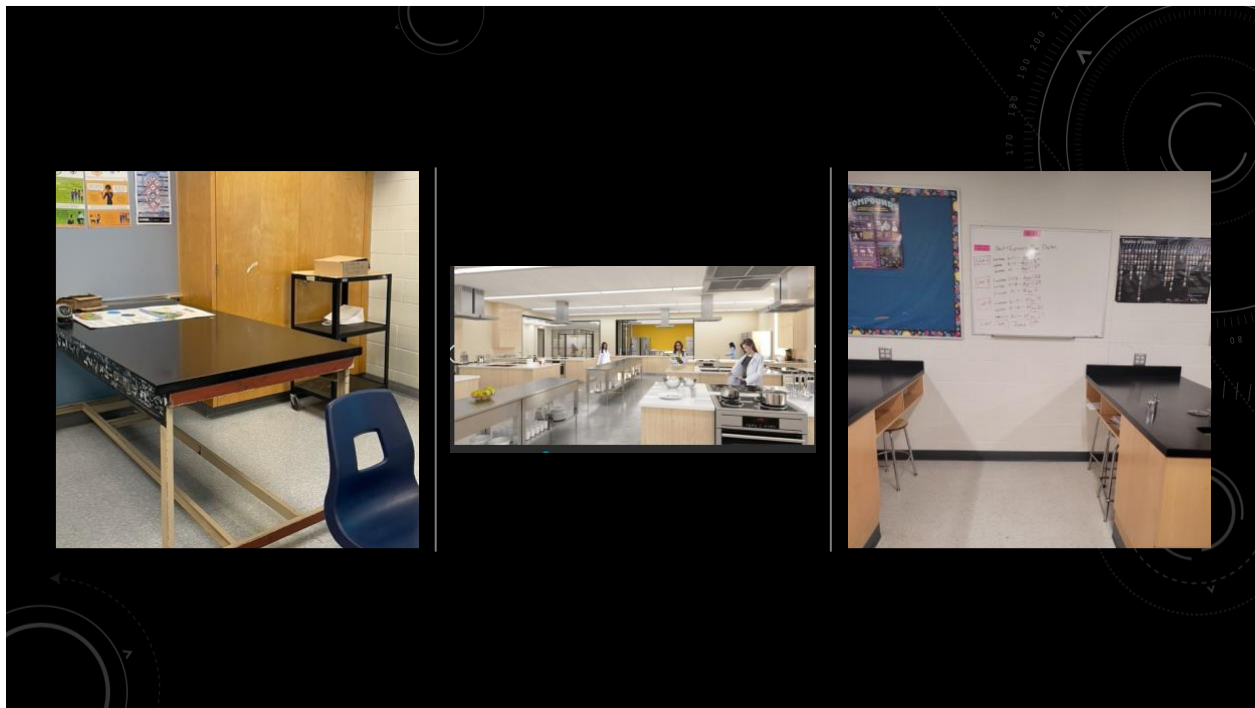
The next group of photos looked at outdoor accessibility. One of the issues noted by students was the quality of the ramps. The ramp in the top left photo looks to be a temporary ramp. As a result, they are not as durable as a ramp made of concrete, or metal. They talked about how they can break, causing the person using it to fall over and become injured. Alternatively, if the person views the ramp as not being secure this insecurity will cause unnecessary stress when used. Another point that was made was that the ramp did not match the length of the open doorway. If someone with a wheelchair was using the ramp, their chair could tip off the ledge due to the ramps small size. With regards to the photo on the right, the student who took the photo says that oftentimes the button is turned off, which makes the door inaccessible to those with mobility devices who need it.

Students recommended that permanent ramps be installed using sturdier materials like concrete, and to make the ramps longer so that they are easier to get up. They also recommended

that doors with automated components be maintained more regularly to ensure that they work properly.

If an able-bodied student was unable to enter the school due to the doors being locked, there would be a huge outcry as they would then be unable to access their education. This would cause them to feel excluded as they would also not be able to socialize with their friends. These experiences were representative of what people with disabilities experienced until 1985, when it was written into the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, that children with disabilities had a right to get an education. This right still gets infringed upon as many physical barriers still exist for disabled students.

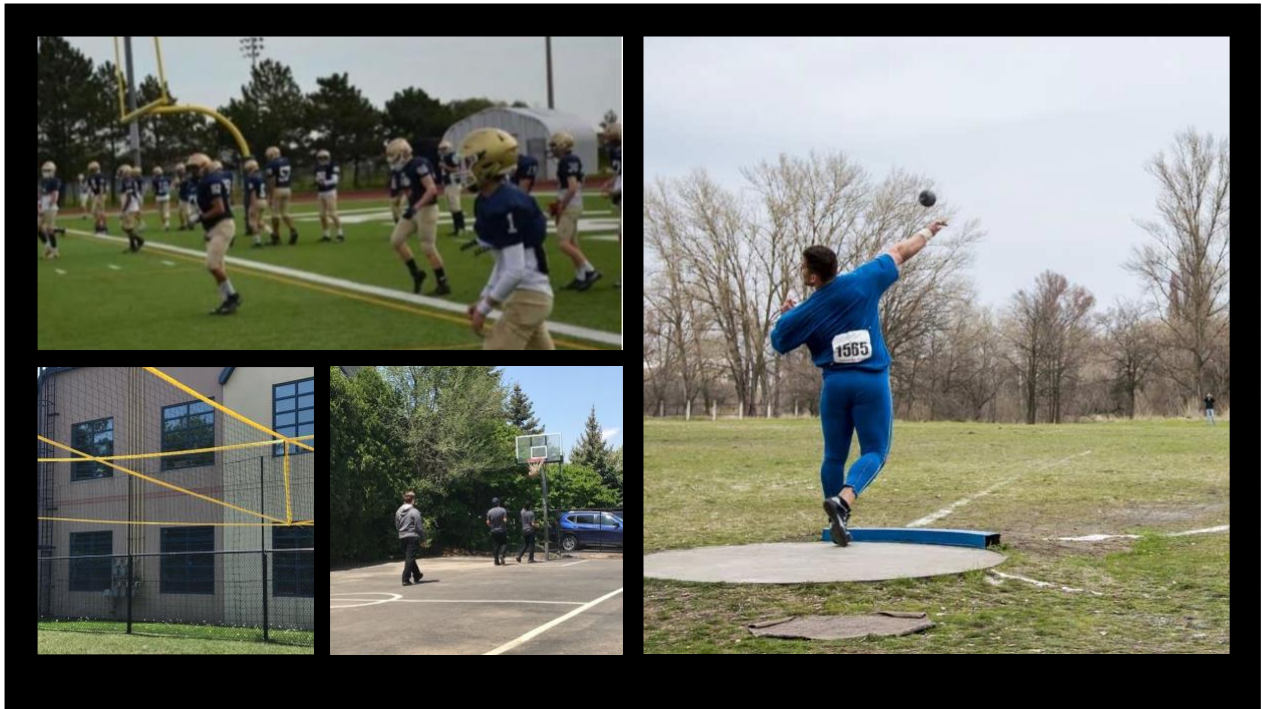
Educational Barriers



Tables

Many students had similar comments around photos of tables in the classroom. That is, that tables are inaccessible due to their height. These types of desks are found in labs and more specifically the chemistry labs. The students talked about not being able to access the tables due to their height. As a result of this, they have a difficult time participating in the curriculum due to not being able to reach the surface of the table to safely conduct the experiments as part of the curriculum. One student said that the height of the table can also pose a safety hazard as the tabletop is level with their face, and if they are working with chemicals then they are more at risk if chemicals are spilt, which can result in severe injuries to them and others. They also said that the tables are permanent fixtures attached to the floor, which makes it impossible to rearrange.

In terms of recommendations, the students suggested lowering some of the tables to a more suitable height to accommodate those with mobility devices.



Sports Clubs

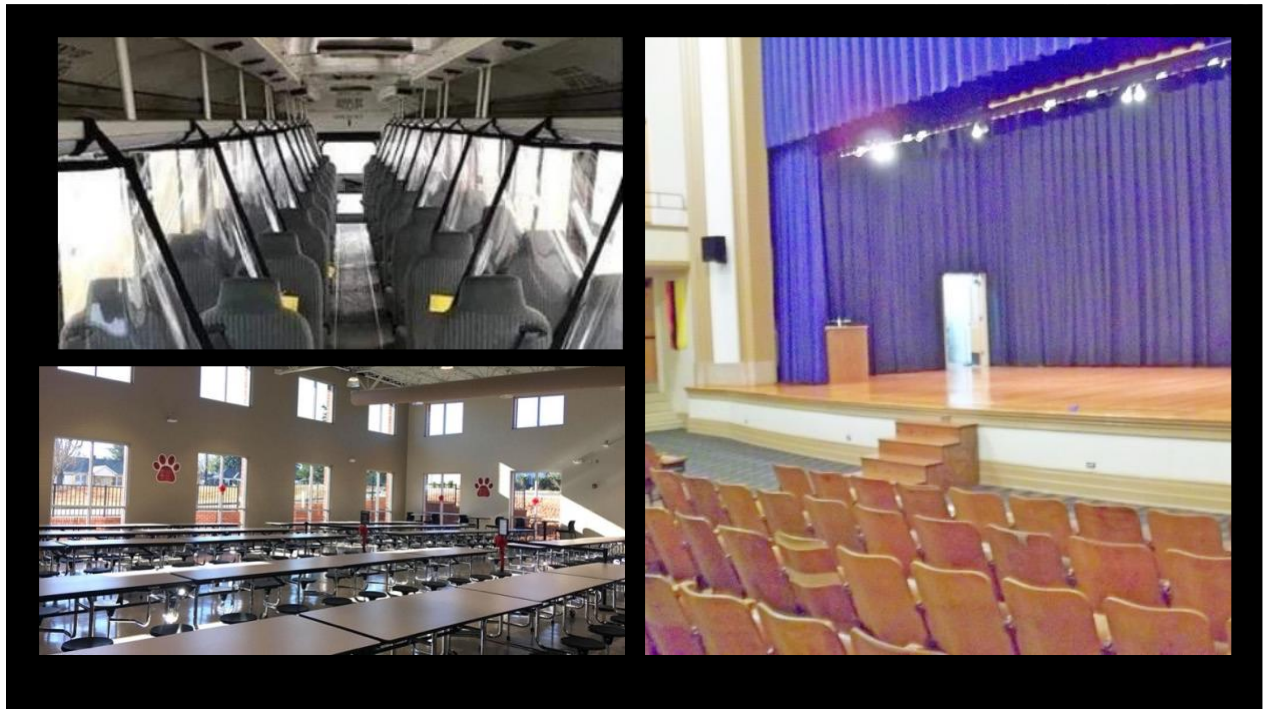
The next group of photos were representative of clubs. Many of the students expressed frustrations around sports and clubs at their school and their lack of accessibility. Many of the students said that their schools had a lack of accessible clubs which prevented them from building friendships and participating in opportunities provided to others. One suggestion that a student had was to create inclusive sports for those with disabilities to participate alongside their able-bodied peers, however, they also said it could cause annoyance among the able-bodied students who might not want to change the sport to be inclusive.

The students had several recommendations for schools to improve inclusivity in clubs. Schools could develop more inclusive clubs and provide a wider variety of options for different clubs – such as computer gaming, etc. With respect to sports, track and field represented a sport where individuals can participate in many of the events alongside able-bodied athletes but not impact their competitions. However, few schools offer access to disabled athletes who may have

an interest due to lack of coaching or commitment for inclusive opportunities. By careful planning, schools could ensure that accessible clubs/ sports are included to allow those with disabilities to participate. Part of that planning may be to simply ask the student and their parents what the interest of their child is, to determine what accommodations could be made to integrate them into the high school community better.

Think of this issue from the perspective of someone from a low-income family. For them the barrier is the cost to join. Their lack of income means that they can't afford to join clubs external to the school, but they could take part on a school team as the school provides the equipment and there is no cost to join. However, little to no consideration is given to a disabled student to find ways to accommodate their interest in participating which further isolates them from their peers.

Social Barriers



Social Events

The next group of photos discussed involved social events. The photos for this group included a bus, a cafeteria, and a gym. In reviewing these photos, we discussed the many barriers present within. In observing the discussions on these photos, I noted that these emitted the most emotion as they represented barriers that isolated the student from everyone else.

Cafeterias are generally overcrowded, with students identifying cafeterias as a nightmare, as it can be hard for those with mobility devices to navigate the space. As a result, the students expressed how hard it is to sit with their friends and socialize. With regards to buses, one student spoke about how they are unable to travel on the bus or go on fieldtrips with their friends, and instead they need to be driven by their parent to take part. This is due to the bus not accommodating wheelchairs, and to get a bus that does, is very expensive. The students also talked about how gyms are also not very accommodating for those with mobility devices. The

seating arrangement for assemblies make it difficult for those with disabilities to sit near their friends, and they are often seated along the edges.

Another student talked about an issue experienced by many who have a severe disability affecting their motor skills, which impacts their eating. Sometimes, those with disabilities need help with eating, and as a result, they are relocated to a different area that is often away from their friends. This results in social isolation as they are no longer able to hang out with their friends during lunch. Another barrier is the time allotted to students for lunch. For some, they take longer to eat, and thus require more time. Unfortunately, this then impacts their ability to get to their next class on time. These observations all led to the same conclusion; students with disabilities are segregated and upon entering high school lack the opportunities to make friendship circles and they therefore start off isolated and remain so for the duration of their high school years.

The students discussed many recommendations for these barriers. With regards to cafeterias, tables could be better spaced out to allow for those with mobility devices space to move around. They expressed a similar thought for making gyms more accessible. They also suggested letting those with mobility devices into the cafeterias and gyms first, to allow them the ability to find a spot to sit amongst their friends.



Inclusivity

The next group of photos discussed revolved around inclusivity. The students discussed their thoughts on the park. Often, students felt that parks excluded those with disabilities due to the inaccessible ground, which is usually made of woodchips, sand, or rocks. These surfaces can be difficult to navigate for those with mobility devices. They also said that the playground equipment is not usually accessible for them either as they are typically constructed with able-bodied people in mind.

With regards to the cafeteria, students discussed the issues around the fact that they felt socially isolated for several reasons. For some, if they need help eating, they are often sitting in a different area, or different room, away from their peers, resulting in a lack of opportunity to socialize. It is important to note that the discussion around these photos emitted an emotional response from the students. Many of the students expressed that these photos upset them or angered them due to many of them experiencing one or more of the situations daily.

The students recommended that they could lay down a rubber mat that could allow students with mobility devices to have easier access to the playground. They also suggested constructing ramps in place of stairs to allow for easier access to play equipment.

Reflecting on previous examples of exclusion in history; two examples that come to mind are the segregation of people of colour, as well as the forced assimilation of Indigenous people through residential schools. These two examples had severe repercussions on the people impacted, as well as future generations. When it comes to students with disabilities, the sense of isolation they experience by being excluded, while not unlike the segregation experienced by people of colour can have damaging repercussions for students. To reduce the sense of isolation, schools need to address the issue of exclusion to create a more inclusive space.



Subject	9th	10th	11th	12th
Languages	Foreign Language	Linguistics	Coding	Coding
Human Geography	Big History	Geography	World History	Economics & Comparative Government
Philosophy	Moral Philosophy	Epistemological Philosophy	Political Philosophy	Comparative Religion
Arts	Visual Arts	Music	Literature	Literature
Sciences	Physics & Calculus	Chemistry	Biology	Statistics

Curriculum

For these last two photos, they were taken from the internet to use as general examples of how the curriculum might act as a barrier. As I was not able to express these ideas in my introductory presentation, I wanted to share these photos with the students to give them a different way of thinking about educational barriers.

In the first photo, I asked them if they felt that guidance counselors were equipped to understand the needs of those with disabilities. Many of the students felt that they did not. As for the photo of the timetable, I wanted the students to reflect on the courses they had taken, or were currently taking, to have them consider if any of their courses explored the topic of disability (i.e., history, geography), or used examples of disabilities in any of their questions (i.e., math, chemistry). On reflection, the students said that could not recall any examples or references of disabilities in any of their courses.

For recommendations, the students suggested that counsellors at the board level with experience in disability be hired to work with students with disabilities. Another recommendation was to hire a counsellor with a disability, as they would have personal experiences that would make them more relatable to students with disabilities.

In terms of disability justice, by incorporating the topic into the curriculum at the high school level, it would allow for a wider audience to learn about and engage with the disabled as part of the curriculum. It would also provide a learning opportunity for able-bodied students who don't have experience being around those with disabilities.

Summary Of Results

This project was designated as a pilot project, as a means of testing the use of a workshop on a small sample size of participants, to determine what was successful, and where adjustments needed to be made before moving on and running the workshop with a broader, and more expansive sample size, such as in a schoolboard. In terms of the results, throughout this process many interesting points emerged. One point was that although I divided the barriers into three categories; physical, social, and educational, the examples within these categories were fluid, and could often fall under the categories of two, or all three categories of barriers. For example, although a lack of a functioning elevator could be seen as a physical barrier, it can also be seen as an educational barrier as without the proper access to the upper floors of a school, students are unable to participate in their school activities alongside their peers. Another was how intersectionality resulted in the barriers being more of an issue for some based on their disability and its severity. Schools that are often located in low-income, predominantly minority communities, are often the oldest schools and lack the funding needed to be made accessible. As a result, those with disabilities are even more negatively impacted due to the lack of available resources to help them succeed.

In terms of the results, students brought up a huge range of issues about barriers that they face daily, such as:

- Barriers created from stairs.
- Desks and overcrowding classrooms and backpacks on the floor creating obstacles, making it hard for those with mobility equipment to navigate around.
- Narrow hallways impacting travel time for those with mobility equipment.

- The quality of the landscape outside of the school and lack of regular maintenance, resulting in potholes, or the presence of gravel causing a safety risk to students with physical disabilities.
- Lack of access to accessible washrooms or elevators.
- Lack of accessible doorways to enter the schools via automatic door openers, or wheelchair ramps.
- Inaccessible chemistry labs.
- Lack of accessible sports clubs.
- Lack of seating choices for cafeterias, gyms, or buses.
- Lack of inclusivity in terms of interacting with their peers on the playground.
- Lack of opportunities to learn about disability in coursework.

These barriers are influenced by a multitude of factors. In terms of intersectionality, the barriers impacted students by varying degrees based on their different life experiences. The age of the school also played a part in the presence of barriers. Some schools may lack accessibility protocols because of when it was built and the limitations of the building. Another issue that results from the age of the school is that it also makes it difficult to do the necessary renovations needed to make the school more accessible. These barriers are also influenced by societies understanding of disability, and their desire, or lack thereof, to make improvements to help those who are different from them. If able-bodied people do not understand disabilities, and the impact that these barriers have on these individuals, then it can be hard to enact change. For example, to able-bodied people, the presence of potholes can be seen as a minor inconvenience, however, for

those who use mobility equipment, it can be considered a severe health risk as they can be tossed from their chair and injured.

In terms of the impact on the social experience of school, the seating arrangements of cafeterias and gyms can make it increasingly difficult for able-bodied and disabled students to interact with one another, thus limiting the opportunity to foster relationships with each other. To become accessible, schools should consider getting certified through programs such as those offered through the Rick Hansen Foundation. Programs such as The Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification (RHFAC) program, work to improve accessibility of buildings, such as where we live, work, learn and play. Getting certified can help build sustainable, inclusive spaces, without costly retrofits, be a visionary leader in equity, diversity and inclusion, and benefit everyone with improved access (Rick Hansen Foundation, n.d). The RHFAC rating survey looks at 9 categories,

- Vehicular access
- Exterior approach and entrance
- Interior services and environment
- Sanitary facilities
- Wayfinding and signage
- Emergency systems
- Additional use of space; *and*
- Trails and pathways

Schoolboards should ensure that their schools establish a policy whereby their schools will exceed the minimum standards required to be designated as accessible to allow for everyone to have access to education.

Conclusion

Throughout my research, I sought to identify and address the many physical, social, and educational barriers that make it difficult for students with disabilities to participate in school. To address these barriers, I developed *Project Accessibility*. This project initially began as a peer-mentorship program, but due to COVID-19, it was transformed into a workshop where I recruited students with physical disabilities in high school to help identify the barriers through the utilization of photovoice and create a list of proposed recommendations that can address barriers moving forward.

The input from the students has been instrumental in helping me understand the barriers they face daily, as well as the negative impact they have on their ability to socialize with their peers, whether it be the lack of accessible clubs, or lack of space in the classroom for those who use mobility devices. In comparing my own high school experience, not a lot has changed in terms of accessibility. There are still areas where ramps could be built, or the landscape could be better tended to. With regards to the social aspects, many of the barriers I faced when attending high school were observed during the workshop discussions as students provided feedback not unlike my experiences eight years prior. As a person with a disability, I would have liked to have seen more disability represented in the curriculum, as well as opportunities to learn about topics relating to disability in our course work, such as disability history, famous people with disabilities, or even, just incorporating the theme of disability in homework questions in math, or

chemistry. Unfortunately, much like my own experience in high school, I observed, through the workshops that the lack of disability related topics remains an issue in today's curriculum.

Overall, I found the use of workshops as a research tool to be very effective as it provided me with the opportunity to incorporate disability justice into the discussions, while hearing from the students on how their different life experiences were impacted by the barriers to their education. Being able to present my findings in the form of words and pictures, provides a strong and coherent message right from the source, that being the students, of how the standard education system from a physical, educational, and social aspect, is generally inaccessible to students with disabilities, and it stresses the importance of the need for change. I hope that in the future this framework that I developed can be used on a larger scale so that all schoolboards can benefit from this workshop. I also see this project as the first step in a multi-step process, with the end goal being the development of a peer-mentorship program to help with the integration of incoming high school students with disabilities into their new environment by pairing them with an older student familiar with the school and the various extra-curricular activities.

My hope is that this workshop, and its future iteration as a peer-mentorship program will allow students with disabilities to adopt self-advocacy skills and be able to speak up for themselves about what they require to succeed in school, and beyond.

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