

Orientations in Spaces Within Dis/Ableist Structures: How Students in Special Classes View Their Spaces and What They Want

Abstract

This critical phenomenological study sought to understand how students classified with disabilities (SCWD) who learn in special classes view their learning environment. Drawing on qualitative data from a previous study (Sarju, 2021), the new study examined *how students in special classes orient themselves as agentic learners in their educational spaces, both in school and virtually*. Ahmed's (2006) queer phenomenology provided guidance for framing the students' perspectives and data analysis. Critical theories, crip theory (McRuer, 2006), grounded in critical disability studies and queer theory, and structure|agency theory (Bandura, 1989; Sewell, 1992) that describes the dialectical relationship between the environment and people, added dimension for data collection and analysis. Upon Institutional Review Board approval, purposeful sampling recruited 5 voluntary participants from 11th and 12th grades special classes. The participants shared their lived experiences of segregated learning through adaptive interviews and photovoice methods. In vivo thematic analysis was performed manually using Dedoose software (Dedoose.com) across several iterations. Themes that emerged showed that the participants' *Orientations in Spaces* placed significance on the learning environment, and they described why. They needed *Enough Space (subcategory Ease of Navigation)* and *Cleanliness* of their spaces. They considered *Atmosphere and leaned into Space, School Materials Size and Use* as spaces to orient themselves. They described their *Positionality* as situated beings in their learning environment, and viewed their *Special Class as a Better Space*. Lastly, the participants found *At-Home Learning Comfort*. The findings revealed the need for greater control over their spaces; they noted what they did not like about the spaces at school and what they needed

instead. Implications of these findings highlight the need to include SCWD in decision-making about learning spaces and their needs within them. Ahmed's (2006) queer phenomenology highlights the importance of positionality in spaces for SCWD, and Braidotti's (2013; 2019) posthumanism underscores anthropocentrism in the educational milieu as often the rule, centering humans and not enough focus on what the non-human environment offers.

Keywords: students with dis/abilities, critical dis/ability theory, special education, learning spaces, critical phenomenology

References

- Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others*. Duke University Press.
- Bandura, A. (1989). Human agency in social cognitive theory. *The American Psychologist*, 44(9), 1175-1185. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0003-066X.44.9.1175>
- Braidotti, R. (2013). *The posthuman*. Polity.
- Braidotti, R. (2019). *Posthuman knowledge*. polity
- Brock, M. E., Schaefer, J. M., & Seaman, R. L. (2020). Self-determination and agency for all: Supporting students with severe disabilities. *Theory Into Practice* 59(2), 162-171. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2019.1702450>
- Choi, S., Guerin, D. A., Kim, H-Y., Brigham, J. K., & Bauer, T. (2013-14). Indoor environmental quality of classrooms and student outcomes: A path analysis approach. *Journal of Learning Spaces* 2(2). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1152654.pdf>
- Clarke, T. B., Nelson, C. L., & Gallagher, S. R. (2020). The influence of traditional and modern learning spaces on pedagogical affect, classroom community, and learning outcomes for marketing students. *Journal for Advancement of Marketing Education*, 1(28), 37-47. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2592389971/fulltextPDF/6A58A267E24F4585PQ/4?accountid=29096&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>
- Dedoose Version 10.0.59, cloud application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed method research data (2026). Los Angeles, CA: SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC www.dedoose.com

Dong, Z., Liu, H., & Zheng, X. (2021). The influence of teacher-student proximity, teacher feedback, and near-seated peer groups on classroom engagement: An agent-based modeling approach. *PLoS ONE*, 16(1), 1-19.

<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0244935>

Kundu, A. (2020). *The power of student agency: Looking beyond grit to close the opportunity gap*. Teacher's College Press.

McRuer, R. (2006). *Crip theory: Cultural signs of queerness and disability*. New York University Press.

Mucherah, W., Finch, W. H., Bota, K., Bowles, H., & Thomas, R. (2025). Classroom climate, teacher support and self-agency: Perceptions of students with and without disabilities. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 72(8), 1470-1488.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912X.2024.2403387>

National Center for Educational Statistics (2023). Table 219.90. *Digest of Education Statistics*.

https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_219.90.asp

National Center for Educational Statistics (2024). *Students with disabilities*.

<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg/students-with-disabilities>

Putman, R. S., Pennington, C. G., Munsey, B. A., Hurless, N., Hill, J. W., & Labansat, H. A.

Does this chair make me look smart? An examination of flexible seating in the higher education classroom. *Learning Environments Research*, 27, 893-911.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10984-024-09509-w>

Sarju, S. (2021). *Toward an understanding of student agency within institutional dis/ableism: A critical phenomenological study* [Doctoral Dissertation, Molloy University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. Digitalcommons@Molloy

<https://digitalcommons.molloy.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1116&context=etd>

Sewell, W. H., Jr. (1992). A theory of structure: Duality, agency, and transformation. *American Journal of Sociology*, 98, 1-29. <https://doi.org/10.1086/229967>

Shogren, K. A., Wehmeyer, M. L., Palmer, S. B., Forber-Pratt, A. J., Little, T. J., & Lopez, S. (2015). Causal agency theory: Reconceptualizing a functional model of self-determination. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, 50(3), 251-263. <https://doi.org/10.1177/215416471505000302>