Taking the “Dis” out of “Disability”:
How a School’s Community of Teachers Works to Empower Students with Disabilities in
an Ableist Education System

By
Laura E. Walkling

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Degree of Master of Teaching
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

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Abstract

In this paper I investigate the perceptions and lived experiences of four teachers and one administrator working at a secondary school in Canada in which all of the students have been institutionally designated with a “disability.” Data was called for this qualitative study through five semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. As I deconstructed and analyzed the lived experiences of the participants, I paid particular attention to their perceptions of what makes this school distinctive; how they as educators develop a sense of community and collegiality in their individual classrooms and the broader school; the issues or challenges they encounter supporting the learning and life chances of students; and the curricular and pedagogical choices they make to ensure their students are challenged and successful. Findings of this study reveal that this school and its community of teachers are a source of insight into the mindset and resulting approach to teaching that educators need to adopt in order to empower students with disabilities with the skills and attitudes necessary to succeed in our ableist society, a society that privileges what has been deemed to be ‘normal.’ The participants’ efforts to empower their students illustrate the challenges educators face in eliminating ableism due to disabling language and an educational system constructed through an ideology of deficit. However, the participants also provide a peak, a flavour, an essence of what is possible when we educate to uncover the potential in our students.

Keywords: Ableism, critical disability, disability language, teacher perceptions, secondary school
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Research Study

Speaking at the 2009 TEDMED conference, Aimee Mullins spoke of the importance in changing attitudes regarding disability. She commenced the presentation with an anecdote. She had always kept a thesaurus handy when writing but was relieved this was not one of her childhood habits for if she had looked for synonyms of disability, her Webster’s New World Thesaurus (Print Issue 1982) would have shown her the following:


Mullins conceded that if she had seen this as a child it would have crushed her spirit and the belief that her life was full of possibilities. Mullins emphasized that her experience of being an amputee was not a state of being she overcame to succeed or fulfill her goals. It was not the amputations that were disabling, but rather the societal labels associated with being ‘disabled’.

A shift needs to occur in how we perceive and understand disability. Through confronting and eliminating society’s belief in disability as a limitation, a deficit, a disease, as abnormal, “we can release the power of so many more children, and invite them to engage their rare and valuable abilities with the community” (Mullins, 2009). A starting point of fostering this belief in youth is through teachers and their classrooms – a place where students go to learn and be challenged. Mullins pointed out that, “in fact, the exact meaning of the word ‘educate’ comes from the root word ‘educe.’ It means ‘to bring forth what is within, to bring out potential’” (Mullins, 2009). What Aimee Mullin so aptly describes is the driving force behind this research study: the desire to reduce disabling attitudes in order to stimulate an educational approach that
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supports individuals of differing abilities and in so doing helps them to recognize and fulfill their potential. To foster a paradigm shift of disability to possibility, teachers need to be confronted with the disabling attitudes that limit students with disabilities. For this shift to take place, educators must also be informed of educational spaces where this shift is occurring: schools where teachers work together to help students to let go of disabling societal perceptions and focus on uncovering the potential of their abilities.

Background of the Researcher

I am a 25-year-old white female with an invisible disability. I was identified with my disability in the graduating year of high school. Being identified later in life has given me a unique perspective on the attitudes our society has toward disability. During my time in the public education system I was accepted and seen as part of the majority, as ‘normal.’ Up until the last year of high school I had never been considered a Special Education student. I was taught, and treated like a “non-disabled” student and as a result never thought of myself as disabled. Internally, I wondered why I faced challenges that others did not struggle with, but these challenges remained hidden, left unnoticed by teachers. I was taught to believe that I could learn and accomplish anything I set my mind to and that I had abilities that were valued by the community, things I could contribute. When I was identified with an invisible disability, people’s attitudes and perceptions of my abilities shifted. While being identified freed me from the belief I held that something was wrong with me, many within my social circle – teachers, friends, family members – were weary and disturbed. I started to be treated differently. I learned what it was like to be treated as disabled. I had to push against perceptions that as a disabled individual, people should feel sorry for me, and not expect as much from me, that my contributions to society were not equal in value to those of a nondisabled individual. It is my belief, that because I was taught
and raised as a ‘non-disabled’ individual, I was able to push back against the stereotypes society was attempting to place on me because I was able to identify them as such – societal beliefs rather than internal truths.

Fostering understanding and respect for the dignity and worth of persons with disabilities, and the value of a society that embraces diversity became my focus during my undergraduate career. I was extensively involved in disability-awareness initiatives and programs. I volunteered with teachers of students with disabilities locally and internationally and organized events that helped students with disabilities learn how to transition from the world of school to full-time employment. As a mentor for first year students with disabilities, I witnessed their anger at having a disability, their feelings of shame, their belief that disability was a weakness, a source of disappointment and a condition they were always fighting against. I worked to help them see their difference as one part of their multifaceted identities, not as a hindrance or barrier. When I entered the Master of Teaching program at OISE/UT in 2012, I had no intention of completing the required major research project on anything disability-related. I did not want to focus in on this particular part of my identity; I did not want to be an advocate. I wanted a break, something new.

When I personally faced disability related discrimination (ableism) in the first few months of my program, it awoke a renewed sense of passion in me. I wanted to change the world! When I informed my research supervisor, Dr. Rob Simon, of this he very eloquently notified me that while this desire was admirable, my focus needed to be narrowed down for the purpose and size of this two-year research project. During conversations with my supervisor, I continually told stories of a school I had heard of all throughout my childhood through a close family friend. This family friend worked at a school where every student had been institutionally
designated with a “disability”. I had heard stories of how the staff were passionate about working at this school and could not imagine working anywhere else; of how much they cared about the students and helping them see past their disabilities; of the unique programs they had to support the diverse range of learning needs; and of parents and graduates who returned to thank the staff of this school for all they did for them. Realizing I was in a unique position to study this school, I chose to make this the focus of my research.

**Research Questions**

With a single school as the focus of this study, I situated my research and analysis around the central question: What are the experiences of teachers and administrators at a school in which all students have been institutionally designated with a “disability”?

The following four sub-questions provided a focus in studying the experience of working at this particular school:

- What are these educators’ perceptions and experiences of their school? In their experiences, what makes this school distinctive?
- How do these educators develop a sense of community and collegiality in their individual classrooms and the broader school?
- What issues or challenges do teachers and administrators encounter supporting the learning and life chances of students?
- What are their curricular and pedagogical choices?

I wanted to know whether the perceptions and experiences of my family friend were the same as other staff members of the school. I wanted to know the successes and struggles this school faced. I wanted to know if this school was so different than the rest, and if so what it did differently. I wanted to know its strengths but also its weaknesses. Essentially, I wanted to know
what made this school tick. The overarching research question and sub-research questions guided my study; they served as the entry-point into the lived experiences of my participants allowing me to paint a picture of the complicated lives they live as educators working at a school that is defined by disability and that works to set its students free of disabling perceptions.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to discuss how educational spaces instill in students with disabilities the belief that they are valued members of our society who have much to contribute. I truly believe that by instilling this belief in our students with disabilities, they will act out this belief. In 2009, the Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy was released with the mandate of “ensur[ing] that all students have the opportunities they need to fulfill their potential” (p. 5). The value of diversity is at the heart of this strategy: “We believe that Ontario’s diversity can be its greatest asset. To realize the promise of our diversity, we must respect and value the full range of our differences” (p. 5). The foundations of the Strategy echo Mullins’ argument for the need for our society to regard difference as empowering, and as a means of contributing to society; that adversity can be a powerful force. Not surprisingly then, a core objective of the Strategy was to “eliminate the biases…[and] barriers…that limit students’ prospects for learning, growing, and fully contributing to society,” particularly for students with disabilities (p. 11).

This research is imperative as the instance of people with disabilities is becoming increasingly common in Canada. In 2011, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) reported, that in 2006, “over 4.4 million Canadians, or about one in seven, had a disability,” (p. 5). Of greater consequence is that of the 4.4 million Canadians, over 95,000 were youths aged 15 to 19 (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2011). The HRSDC
(2011) also notes an additional 202,350 children aged 0 to 14 experience disability in Canada (p. 46). Considering that there are close to 100,000 students experiencing disability in secondary schools today and an estimated 200,000 entering the secondary system in the near future, it is essential that educators are educated about the systemic perceptions of disability that result in the creation of debilitating barriers for students with disabilities. It is also essential that educators gain access to stories of teachers and schools that are trying to understand how to empower students with the skills and attitudes necessary to succeed in our society in spite of these disabbling attitudes.

The study of Mountainview Collegiate Institute, a secondary school in Canada in which all students have been designated with “disability” is one such story. By prioritizing the voices of staff at this school, this research works to promote the Ontario Ministry of Education’s (2009) “commit[ment] to the elimination of…discrimination on the basis of disability” (p. 10). The staff of this school are a source of insight into the mindset and resulting approach to teaching that educators need to adopt in order to empower students with disabilities in an educational environment; in order for students with disabilities to be taught that they are valued and have strengths and abilities that will allow them to contribute to our society.

Overview

This research project contains five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the study, the research question and a section on my own positionality in relation to the topic of study. Chapter 2 contains a literature review that consults the work of disability and critical disability theorists on the construction of the identity that is disability, as well as research on the impact of ableist attitudes within education. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology used in this

1 This and all names are pseudonyms.
study including a description of the participants, how the data was collected and analyzed, the ethical review procedures, and limitations of the study. Chapter 4 reports the data collected. Chapter 5 provides an analysis of the data and how the findings connect to the overarching research questions. In Chapter 5 I also discuss the implications of these findings, offer recommendations and suggest areas for further study.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Disability Studies in Education

Disability Studies has become a significant and growing movement in educational research, theory and practice. Disability studies in education works to expose the discriminatory and oppressive implications of the medical/clinical model, “wherein disability represents innate individual deficits” (Gabel, 2005, p. 2). From the perspective of the medical model, disability is something to be fixed, an illness that requires a cure. Embedded in, and “perpetuate[d]” by the education system is this “ideology of deficit” (Kang, 2009, p. 3; Erevelles, 2005; Gabel 2005). Erevelles (2005) explains because disability “has been historically associated with medical conceptions of disease[, it]…has, in turn, been associated with inconvenience, nonproductivity, weakness, lack of autonomy, and incapacity” (p. 74). The economic impact alone is that individuals with disabilities “have either been completely excluded from participating in economic activity or are located at the lowest rungs of the social division of labor” (Erevelles, 2005, p. 74). Thus, disability studies argues that it is the social meanings associated with “disability” that are limiting and oppressive, not the difference itself. It is emphasis Disability Studies places on exposing the oppression within the educational system due to the medical model that this study aligns with.

Where this research study departs from Disability Studies is in the distinction made between impairment and disability by many Disability Studies scholars (Brueggemann, White, Dunn, Heffron, & Johnson, 2001; Gabel, 2005; Gere, 2005). Brueggemann, White, Dunn, Heffron, and Johnson (2001) aptly explain the distinction:

Impairment is a physical difference – difference in hearing, vision, mobility, brain function. Disability is more than impairment; disability is what society makes of that
impairment in constructing ‘disability’ as the opposite of something thereby recognized as ‘normality,’ part of a structure that privileges some and oppresses others. (p. 372-373)

The distinction attempts to separate the bodily difference from the social oppression of the bodily difference. The insistence on the existence of a state of impairment stems from a desire to “recognize [an individual’s] unique phenomenological experiences of having an impairment – experiences that mark their bodies as irreducibly different from normal bodies,” experiences that “are integral to their identity” (Erevelles, 2005, p. 65). Thus, some within Disability Studies attempt to exact power and validation from the experience of being impaired, while separating the experience from the social oppression that accompanies the experience. This study does not align with the attempt to gain authority, distinction, a voice or power through the label of disability. My belief is that finding power in the label of having an impairment only reinforces the binary society has created between those who are not normal and those who are supposedly normal. Instead of focusing on the individual level disability – where the lines are drawn between an individual as impaired verses disabled – this study focuses on the systemic (the societal level) causes of disability oppression.

Critical Disability Studies

Critical disability theory argues that disability is not about the individual; the problem lies not with the individual but with how society is constructed. Disability itself is a social construct. Pothier and Devlin (2006) explain that “persons with disabilities may experience functional limitations…that non-disabled persons do not experience, but the biggest challenge comes from mainstream society’s unwillingness to adapt, transform, and even abandon its ‘normal’ way of doing things” (p. 13). Thus, critical disability theory suggests that disability does not exist. Variation in bodily functions does exist but the hierarchy of what is considered
normal bodily abilities is a social construct. As Anderson (2006) states, “difference and defect are not synonymous” (p. 371). The focus then shifts from seeing the individual with the disability as the problem, to seeing the system - the social beliefs and views of a society - as the issue; the belief that certain bodily abilities are better than others is manifested in all levels of society (Pothier & Devlin, 2006, p. 13).

Like disability studies, critical disability theory works to expose the medical model of disability. From the perspective of critical disability theory, adopting the medical model means adopting the mindset or goal of “eliminat[ing] the defect” (p. 10). Difference has no place in a society governed by the medical model; having a different state of being is not equal or acceptable for there is only one right way for the body to function and any differentiation needs to be fixed so that it will function in a way that is considered ‘normal’. Pothier and Devlin (2006) explain, “to start from the perspective that disability is misfortune is to buy into a framework of charity and pity rather than equality and inclusion” (p. 10). Apply this to education and the result is that as long as the medical model is used, barriers will exist for those with disabilities; they will be treated inequitably, and be excluded as a result of them being a part of the ‘abnormal’ group of individuals, the state of being that is pitied and less preferable. This research study thus aligns with the goals of critical disability theory; to acknowledge that difference exists and has a place within our society, and to show that the state of being we call disability is systemically oppressive (Pothier & Devlin, p. 12). Fulfilling these will then allow society to “pursue solutions tailored to the goals of full inclusion and participation” (Pothier & Devlin, p. 12). For the purposes of this research project, the societal level being focused on is the classroom society/community of schools.
Ableism in Education

In keeping with disability studies and critical disability theory, this research project aims to reduce ableism in the classroom. Ableism is defined as,

a pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion that oppresses people who have mental, emotional and physical disabilities…Deeply rooted beliefs about health, productivity, beauty, and the value of human life, perpetuated by the public and private media, combine to create an environment that is often hostile to those whose physical, mental, cognitive, and sensory abilities…fall out of the scope of what is currently defined as socially acceptable. (Rauscher & McClintock, 1996, p. 198)

Ableism is the mistreatment of individuals who have different abilities because they are unable to fit within the mold of what society deems to be normal. Succinctly put, ableism is “discrimination in favour of the able-bodied and able-minded” (Gabel, 2005, p. 4). Thus, ableism is a result of society’s creation of a dichotomy between the normal and the abnormal. Not surprisingly then, ableism in education has disabling effects on students with different abilities (Storey, 2007). Thomas Hehir, a Harvard Graduate from the School of Education, former director of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education programs, former Associate Superintendent for the Chicago Public Schools, and former Director of Special Education in the Boston Public Schools is often cited for his explanation of the implications of ableism in education (Gabel, 2005; Storey, 2007). In schools, Hehir (2002) explains, ableism, devalu[es]…disability result[ing] in societal attitudes that uncritically assert that it is better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read Braille, spell independently than use a spell-check, and hang out with nondisabled kids as opposed to other disabled kids…In short, in the eyes of many educators and society, it is preferable for disabled students to do things in the same manner as nondisabled kids. (p. 3)

The effect of ableism in education is that educators focus on finding ways to fix or accommodate students with disabilities to make it so they can minimize their difference as much as possible in order to act as much as possible like nondisabled students. Exclusionary attitudes result from
ableism as well as the belief that students with disabilities “should not be challenged” (Hehir, 2002, p. 4) because they are not as capable, as able, as students without disabilities.

In Gere’s (2005) discussion of the judgments people make about disabled individuals based on appearance, she shares the story of her daughter’s fear of disclosing that she has an invisible disability to her teachers (p. 54-56). The fear stemmed from the discomfort that came with the reaction she often received: “disbelief and denial” (p. 55). As an intelligent, capable, and hardworking student, her teachers could not equate her with disability; the two seemed incompatible. They “actively refuse to believe that she has an impairment” (Gere, 2005, p. 56). Hehir (2002) asserts, “the most damaging ableist assumption is the belief that disabled people are incapable” (p. 27). When teachers regard students as incapable, classrooms are created that “positions particular students as unable to achieve success” (Kang, 2009, p. 3). The result is that the students do not succeed and this then “confirms [the] initial perception and reifies [the] student as disabled” (Kang, 2009, p. 3). This argument is supported by a study by Collins (2003), in which a classroom teacher regarded the low achievement of her students with disabilities as a result of their disabilities, as a result of something internal within them and the result manifested in creating a classroom that does not support their learning or challenge them. Thus, like Hehir (2002) and Storey (2007) this research project argues that identifying ableism in schools and its effects can lead to creating inclusive educational environments for students with disabilities. As Hehir (2002) explains,

there needs to be a recognition that education plays a central role in the integration of disabled people in all aspects of society both by giving children the education they need to compete and by demonstrating to nondisabled children that disability is a natural aspect of life. (p. 27)

In recognizing ableist attitudes, the belief that students with disabilities are incapable can be removed, and the emphasis on fixing them to act like ‘normal’ students can be replaced with an
emphasis on helping them learn “modes of learning and expression” that are “disability specific” – rolling rather than walking, signing rather than speaking, reading Braille rather than print, and using a spell-checker rather than spelling independently (Hehir, 2002, p. 3). When our “students [who are] labeled as disabled can be valued for their differences and constructed as whole people, rather than viewed through the lens of their disability” we will have succeeded (Kang, 2009, p. 4).

**Language of Disability**

Inherent in the language used to discuss disability are the perspectives of the medical model (Ferri, Connor, Solis, Valle, & Volpitta, 2005). ‘Disability’, the word used to define this area of study, this type of bodily difference, is itself derogatory. An individual who is or chooses to be recognized for the bodily difference they have is given one choice – to identify with a term that posits them as dis-abled. The very language used to discuss disability is witness alone to the ableist ideologies within society. Words such as “‘diagnosis,’ ‘referral,’ ‘identification,’ ‘deficit,’” stem from the medical model (Kang, 2009, p. 6). I have already used language from the medical model when discussing my personal experiences with disability despite my desire to move away from the medical model. The reason is because this language is embedded within society. This is because “every story is mediated through and against the dominant discourse” and as a result, “even in [the] rejection of these discourses, [we]…again engag[e] with them” (Ferri et al., 2005, p. 75; Kang, 2009). It is important to note that the language of disability sustains the binary between normal and abnormal through the negative connotation of the words but also because it is only the individuals with difference that are named. Kang (2009) explains:

> While normalcy is hidden and unnamed in the society, abnormality is named in various ways. We name some students who are considered as having disabilities through names such as *autism, mental retardation, and learning disabilities*. However, we do not name
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some students who are not considered having disabilities. Nondisabled students remain unnamed. (p. 6)

Students without disabilities remain unnamed because, their state of being is considered natural, they are the standard to which all else is compared (Kang, 2009, p. 6). Thus, “it is the act of labeling as the marker of disability that holds so much power” (Kang, 2009, p. 10).

Not surprisingly then, there are differing opinions on how to refer to individuals with disabilities in academic research. Using “people-first language,” (Gabel, 2001, p. 32) such as person with a disability, individuals with disabilities, teachers with disabilities, and students with disabilities is one of the devices researchers employ. “Disability-first language” (Gabel, 2001, p. 32), such as disabled teacher, and disabled student, is the alternate option. The justification for using person-first language is that it “maintain[s] disability as a characteristic of the individual, as opposed to the defining variable” (Linton, 1998, p. 13). Person-first language emphasizes the individual as multifaceted with disability as one part of their identity. However, Titchkosky (2001) argues that separating the disability and person does not eliminate the perspective that disability is abnormal and limiting or deficient part of an individual.

Disability-first language has been used to unite the group of individuals who share similar difference so as to gain a voice and presence in the political sphere (Gabel, 2001; Linton, 1998). Thus, “‘disabled’ has become a marker of the identity that the individual and group wish to highlight and call attention to (Linton, 1998, p. 13). Thus, disability-first language - the act of giving disability priority – can be used as “sources of pride and community” (Ferri et al., 2005, p. 65; Gabel, 2001). Gabel (2001) argues “that disability can simultaneously be a source of pride and a symbol of oppression or discrimination” (p. 32). A caveat is that while ‘disability’ is being used by some as a means to generate pride and thus power over those who use it as a demeaning term, it continues to reinforce ableist ideas of persons with disabilities as defined by negative
bodily functions. While both person-first and disability-first language enforce ableist values, person-first allows and gives space for the idea that the person’s difference is one part of their identity. Thus, I have chosen to use person-first language because, as Potheir & Devlin (2006) so aptly put state, “we believe that currently [it] is the least worst option” (p. 4). In keeping with the theories of Critical Disability Studies, Disability Studies, and the reasons for person-first language, this research study will also attempt to maximize the use of the word “difference”.

Kang (2009) explains that

    replacing the term, deficit, with difference...signals a conceptual shift from marking individuals based on a perception of deficiency as the undesirable opposite of ‘normal’ to perceiving disability as part of the range of differences pervasive in the human palette. (p. 7)

Thus, every attempt will be made to emphasize the value of difference and multidimensional identity of each individual rather than the negative emphasis of the medical model.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This qualitative research project focused on the experiences and perceptions of teachers and administrators at a Canadian school who only teach and support students with disabilities. This study aligns with the qualitative research goal of “want[ing] to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). The participants are the experts of their experience and their stories are a source of knowledge. The qualitative method allowed me the opportunity to position myself explicitly to the research, for “all researchers bring values to a study, but qualitative researchers like to make explicit those values” (Creswell, 2013, p.18).

More specifically, a phenomenological approach was used for this study as outlined by John W. Creswell (2007) in *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*. In alignment with Creswell (2007), this research is a phenomenological study in that it “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 57). In this instance, the phenomenon is considered the shared experience of working at Mountainview Collegiate Institute. The focus of this research was to determine the shared experiences of the participants in relation to the phenomenon, and to then determine the “universal essence” of experiencing the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). This chapter outlines each stage of the research process as well as the limitations of the study.
Literature Review

The purpose of the literature review was to first become familiarized with the differing approaches to researching the topic of disability. In learning of the field of disability studies and the similar yet contrasting approach of critical disability studies I was able to understand how to situate this research study within these two activist approaches. The result was that this research study adopted the critical approach to disability research and use this as a framework through which the comments of my participants were analyzed. Studies on the impact of ableism within the education system were consulted in the literature review to understand the type of research that has been done in on the topic of reducing barriers for students with disabilities. An equal amount of attention was dedicated to studying the use of language within disability-related studies and language used within the educational system in order to become well versed and cognizant of the terminologies used to define difference, and how they either enforce or fight against ableist attitudes. Becoming familiar with the language of disability provided the understanding necessary to deconstruct the words and ideas the participants use to perceive and make sense of disability.

Sources of information included books, book chapters, peer-reviewed academic articles, and autobiographical narratives of individuals with disabilities as students and/or teachers in the education system. The literature review informed the research questions, the development of the interview questions and provided the necessary framework for how to interpret the data collected from those interviews and make sense of the findings.

Participant Selection

For the purposes of this research study I interviewed five staff members from the school: four teachers and one administrator. I had at my disposal an entire staff but was very particular
when selecting my participants. I wanted to capture a range of experiences in regards to the number of years they had been teaching and the number of years they had been at this particular school. Similarly, I wanted to interview a mix of both technical teachers – teachers who prior to entering the field of teaching worked in trades-based industries – and subject-based teachers who specialize in teaching a particular subject and do not have a background in the Trades profession.

My intent was also to interview staff members who served different roles (support, classroom teacher, administrator) thus collectively provided insight into the inner-workings of a variety of spaces within the school. In addition, I wanted to find participants that shared a vested interest in the school and its students because I believed this would lead me to staff members who were aware of the barriers students faced due to their disabilities. Lastly, I wanted participants whose roles demanded working with a diverse range of teachers at the school so that I could determine whether or not a shared common purpose was part of the school culture or unique to specific individuals. Pseudonyms were used for specific individuals, programs, and institutions discussed in the interviews. The four teachers that I interviewed were Aubree, Ian, Harry and Naomi and the one administrator was Rachel. I had heard of all of these individuals through stories told over the years by my family friend, François. I asked François for the contact information of these individuals and contacted them by email.

Of the teachers interviewed, Aubree had been working in the field of teaching and at the school for the shortest length of time. Aubree had been a teacher for less than six years and had been teaching at the school for two years. She was the lead teacher of the new Gateway program, a program for students who required one-on-one support for half of every school day. Aubree worked as a technical teacher within the school before taking on this lead position. In contrast, Ian was a subject-based teacher who had been working at the school since its founding; he was
one of the original teachers who opened the school. I believed that these two participants perceptions would serve as an interesting point of comparison. I assumed that Aubree may have offered a “new” view of the school due to the short length of time she worked there and because she is new to the staff community. She would mostly have gone through a different education system than the more senior staff. During her time in teacher’s college and/or in Additional Qualification courses, she may have been taught about special education students from a different framework than was used in the past. In contrast, Ian would possibly provide insight into the changes the school had experienced in the students who attended and the staff who worked there.

Naomi was chosen as a participant because he was also had a technical background and had been teaching for just over ten years, nine of which have been at this school. In the stories I had heard of Naomi she was described as a teacher who cared deeply for the students. I had heard of the work she did running the Arbour Room, a room and program that supports students with Autism and was thus in constant contact with administrators, parents and teachers. Similarly, Harry was chosen because he worked as a support teacher within the school. He is one of the teachers who runs the Connect Room, a department that is a room in the school where students who are having difficulty managing and understanding their behaviour can go to and find support. I had heard stories of how in this role he served as an intermediary between students and teachers and took an interest in the administrative side of the school. Stories told about Harry spoke of how he seemed to move within both administrative and teacher circles at the school and was respected by the staff. Together, Harry and Naomi were individuals who both began as teacher but seemed to have taken on roles within the schools that put them in contact with a large array of teachers and who could provide insight into both the teaching and
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administrative circles of the school.

The administrator I interviewed was Rachel. She selected as a participant because she had served in the role of Vice-Principal of Mountainview Collegiate Institute for over three years and I had heard stories that the staff respected her for her firm but fair approach. She had been described to me as an administrator who was in it for the students and for the teachers. Thus, I chose these five individuals because I believed their experiences independently and collectively would provide wealth of insight into the phenomenon of working at Mountainview.

Data Collection and Analysis

In this research study, data was collected through the five semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Interviews were conducted on the school premise. Four interviews were conducted on the same day (Aubree, Naomi, Rachel, and Ian). This was unplanned but because the interviews took place in the final days before the school’s closing my participants had limited time to meet. I had the option of conducting interviews over the summer but wanted my participants to be in the school environment that I was studying, and in the mindset of teaching and administrating. Interviewing at the school was also the method preferred by my participants. Conducting interviews toward the end of the school year worked to my advantage because the teachers all shared that they had been reflecting on the past year before they were about to leave for the summer. The fifth interview (Harry) was conducted two weeks later at the school. Each of the interviews was conducted in a private room of their choice to limit, as much as possible, interruptions to the conversation. Also, questions the interviewers were asked were sensitive in nature in regards to their opinions of fellow staff and administrators and thus the private room was necessary to ensure they were not self-monitoring their responses due to the presence of other staff members in the room.
At the beginning of each interview I reiterated the purpose of the study and my personal connection to the school. In so doing, I disclosed that I had a disability. To each of my participants, I stressed that they were the experts of their experience, and were not to assume that I knew anything about the school or its inner-workings. While I had heard stories through François, I emphasized that I wanted to gain their insight into the school and their experiences of working at the school. Lastly, I emphasized that transcriptions would be confidential, only reviewed by my supervisor, my course instructor and myself.

In keeping with the phenomenological approach outlined by Creswell (2007), the interview questions were centered on capturing what each participant had “experienced in terms of the phenomenon” and what “contexts or situations [had] typically influenced or affected [their] experiences of the phenomenon” (p. 61). Questions regarding their experience of the phenomenon included: “Tell me a bit about how you came to be at Mountainview” and “What is it like, working at Mountainview?” Questions regarding what has influenced or impacted their experience included: “What supports do you have?”; “How has Mountainview impacted you? What do you think the impact is of working here on teachers?”; and “What are the relationships like among the staff? Do you feel like there is a sense of community?” All of the questions were aimed at gathering information on their perceptions of the phenomenon. I paid particular attention to the order of the questions to reflect a transition from asking background information and their day-to-day routines to more personal questions of their hopes for the students, the reason they are teachers, and their perceptions of disability. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, the questions were used as a guide to supplement the conversation. I used the same list of guiding questions for each interview. In using a more conversational-based method of interviewing, the duration of interviews ranged from 60 minutes to 90 minutes. The interviews
were recorded using a digital device and later transcribed. A complete list of the interview questions is provided in Appendix B.

To begin the data analysis process, I first fully transcribed the interviews. I then read and reread the transcripts several times to become familiar with the data. During the initial readings of the transcripts I used the phenomenological approach of “highlighting ‘significant statements,’ sentences, or quotes that provide[d] an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon” a technique referred to as “horizontization” (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). After the initial readings of the transcripts I then colour-coded these highlighted sections into themes and thus developed “clusters of meaning from these significant statements” (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). The results of my data analysis are presented in Chapter 4 and further discussed in Chapter 5.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

In accordance with the ethical review procedures for the Master of Teaching program, I provided each participant with a letter of consent (Appendix A) briefly detailing my research, the contact information of my research supervisor, an overview of the interview process, as well as assurances of anonymity. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time until the completion of the research project. I retained the original copy of each of their signed consent forms with their signatures for my records. To ensure confidentiality, all personal information and descriptors that compromised the identities of my participants was adapted and if necessary, removed from the transcriptions. Pseudonyms were used for specific individuals, programs, and institutions discussed in the interviews.
Limitations of Study

The Master of Teaching research project is defined by strict timeline. If more time had been available I would have returned to my literature review and consulted more research in the field of disability studies and teaching that aligns with the themes that emerged from the data.

The second limitation is in regards to the selection of participants. The participants were chosen based on stories I had heard of the school from the perspective of a family friend. I was of course interested to interview many of the staff members I had heard about through these stories and thus the data is influenced by this choice. I was aware of this limitation while selecting the participants and thus placed an emphasis on interviewing those teachers I had heard of who interacted with a wide range of teachers in the school. Researching teachers outside of the social circles my family friend is familiar with added valuable insights to the research study.

This research focused on the lives of staff at this school. Interviewing students from the school would provide an interesting point of comparison with the staff’s experience of the school. Similarly, interviewing graduates of the school – their experience with teachers and administrators at the school, the supports they received, to what extent the school has influenced their life choices, self-perceptions and abilities – would provide insight into whether or not this school is an empowering learning environment that has made a difference in their lives. A research project of this size is beyond the confines of the Master of Teaching Research Paper. The time required to acquire the necessary ethical approval to interview students from school boards is extensive, a commitment that I could not make within the boundaries of the MT research project. Similarly, the time it would have taken to collect the data, transcribe the interviews, and analyze additional experiences would have exceeded the time commitment of the MT program.
Diversity is also a limitation of this study. All of the participants would be socially constructed as white and able-bodied. Also only one of the five interviewees was an administrator of the school and thus to gain a greater insight into the experiences of administrators, more would need to be interviewed.

Lastly, it is important to recognize my personal biases and limitations as the researcher. The intentions behind this research study were to gain insight into how teachers conceive of disability, how they interact and engage with students with disability and how these experiences, challenge or align with societal understandings and experiences of disability. I researched this school because I believed it was a story worth telling. My personal investment in this topic is a limitation and strength of this study as I am drawing on my own experiences. The framing of the research question, as well as the collection and interpretation of the data are not objectively constructed but rather created in relation with my background, experiences and beliefs.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

In this chapter I analyze the interviews of five staff of Mountainview Collegiate Institute to understand their lived experiences of working at the school, their perceptions of the school and its students, and their perceptions of how this school is supporting its students. In order to illustrate the multiple layers of meaning and connection within and amongst the material, I have coded the data into five clusters of meaning, or themes: Perceptions of Mountainview; Community and Collegiality; Defining Disability; and A Segregated School. These themes are further broken down into subthemes so as to highlight the complexities and intricacies in investigating the overarching research question of this study: What are the experiences of teachers and administrators at a school in which all students have been institutionally designated with a “disability”?

Perceptions of Mountainview

From the stories told by my family friend, Francois, Mountainview Collegiate Institute sounded like a school that was misunderstood. From François’s stories I was given the impression that the school had a negative reputation because of its past, and that it had been unable to free itself from such negative perceptions. I also heard François tell stories of how the reputation of Mountainview was much different among those who had experienced the school, that it was a life-changing school.

I wanted to know how the participants perceived Mountainview, how they conceived of the school in the eyes of those who were familiar and unfamiliar with the school. From their responses I hoped to learn to what degree Mountainview is valued within our educational system.
and who it is valued by. In addition, I wanted to gain an understanding of how the history of Mountainview – its beginnings, and transformations over time – are intertwined with its reputation. Thus, in this section I explore the history of Mountainview, and perceptions of Mountainview by students, teachers, parents, administrators, and educational leaders at the Board level.

A Rough Beginning

As one of the founding teachers of the school, Ian was able to provide insight into the history of Mountainview’s reputation, how it had changed over the years and why:

Back when we started we had three streams. Advanced, general and basic were the three high school streams in this province. We had mainly basic, but we [also] had a general stream of kids…A quarter of our population were modestly solid academic guys who a good chunk could have gone to college if that was what they chose, their ambition or goal. And then over the years, there was, I suppose this happens anywhere where you have a school like ours, the kids who are hard to serve behaviourally in other high schools, they kind of start to assume that they belong in a school like ours.

Mountainview was first a school for a diverse range of students with a majority in what would be considered the “lower” stream. With larger numbers in the basic level, people began to assume that it meant Mountainview was the place to send the more difficult students. It was only because of the larger numbers in the basic stream that Mountainview began to become a place for the more difficult students in the school system. Assumptions regarding the school directly correlate to not the students who attend, but the perceptions of the students who attend. A correlation seems to have occurred in the minds of educators between students deemed as having a lower level of intelligence, students who were not college focused, and students who demonstrated behavioural issues. Grouping these students together did not seem like a problem, if anything it seemed appropriate. A solution. Ian shares how at the time, when the inclination for students
with behavioural issues to be shipped to Mountainview began, it was very frustrating, and is an
issue that haunts Mountainview to this day:

This has been an argument since the beginning of our school. They want to put them here
and we say, “Well, what level are they functioning at?” I mean if they’re in academic
they will be bored in my basic level class which means they will probably cause more
behaviour problems in my classroom. And we’re not doing them a service. If it’s
behaviour, address their behaviour.

Educators did not recognize the difference between students who had been identified as needing
more support with their learning, and students who were struggling with behaviour. The stream
divisions of Mountainview were based on learning abilities not on behaviour. Mountainview did
not necessarily have the services available to support students with behavioural needs just as the
schools who were sending them lacked the necessary services. Regardless of whether or not
Mountainview had the services, they were sent these students. Mountainview entered a new
stage in its history; the face of the school changed. Ian sheds light on this shift and how the
biggest challenge Mountainview faced was a lack of information on the needs of the students
they were receiving:

The ‘general levelers’ kind of shrank over the next five to ten years and then we became,
sort of a middle period where I would say we had a lot more behaviour kids. We didn’t
have administrators who were very savvy. There was a lot of dumping going on by other
schools and in other Boards, kids weren’t necessarily IEP’d there. They were identified
so they could recommend them to Mountainview. There wasn’t anything we could really
say because there was no data to say where they belonged…so yeah we had about a
middle section at least in my career here, where it was a lot rougher.

The implication being made is that students were being sent to Mountainview who should not
have been. Mountainview was left with the task of figuring out how to handle this new influx of
students. It is not surprising that Ian describes this stage of Mountainview, this “middle” period
as a lot rougher. Mountainview was in transition with a lot on its plate. It had also gained a new
reputation of the school where the “rough” ones go.
I asked Ian why he thought the dumping was occurring. He suggested that at that point in time, the educational system was itself uncertain of how to move forward; it did not yet have the specialized programs it has today:

I think the Board itself was struggling with students they didn’t know how to serve, they didn’t have programs. Like the Elgin Board now has programs for kids who are not expelled but are removed from school and going through a program so they can return to a school setting.

Educators simply did not know what to do. Educational infrastructure for these students was not available. Mountainview seemed a viable option, an escape route. Mountainview was left with the challenge of developing appropriate programming for an overly diverse range of students at the school and for students that other schools were giving up on.

I have relied heavily on Ian’s interpretations of Mountainview’s early history. There may be gaps in his knowledge and his story is obviously impacted by his own perceptions and experiences. However, the story is important. He is one of the founding teachers of the school, the only teacher left of the founders at Mountainview. He was referred to me for this study because of his knowledge of the school’s past, the tumultuous beginnings, the history of Mountainview.

A Changed Student Body

Mountainview’s student body is not what it once was. Harry and Ian speak of the last ten to fifteen years as a time when Mountainview’s student body has undergone significant transformation. Harry explained:

Mountainview has changed over the years. When I first came here we had a large Vocational 2 type population but we lost a lot of those kids. So the school’s evolution over the years has become more specialized and the general overall exceptionality that the students have has become greater. For instance, we have a large [Autism Spectrum Disorder] program now that we never had. It used to be if you had a student with Autism in your class it was noteworthy. We’d have a couple spread throughout the building.
we have 70 in our regional program...My first year here we had 13 incoming students which were Vocational 1. Now we’re around 40 to 50 every year. So rather than being a small exceptional class here, [the Vocational 1] now make up 30 percent of the school. A lot of our upper end Vocational 2 students go to their home schools to the locally developed courses, so we don’t get those kids anymore. The nature and building itself has shifted over 10 years.

Students once registered in the advance stream no longer attend Mountainview; that stream is not offered. Mountainview has become as school primarily made up of students in the basic level or lower. In addition, as Harry explains, there are very few students in the basic stream and there are a greater number of students in the school with very specialized needs. Ian closely echoes Harry’s comments on Mountainview’s transformation over the years:

The nature of our clientele has changed in the last 15 years, like now we don’t have basic, general, advanced. I guess when we had basic we had special basic below that, sort of between basic and mentally handicapped, developmentally delayed, however you wish to identify that group. Now we talk about Vocational 1, Vocational 2, and Applied. We now have a much bigger Voc 1, its almost a third of our school population where back at the beginning it was a very small percent, most being what was basic or Voc 2. The small general level, now it’s a third. Let’s say that’s a 150 kids to 160 kids, a third of those are ASD, some not all of whom are Voc 2.

Both emphasize how the number of students who experience Autism has increased in the school as well as the number of students considered special basic, or Vocational 1. Thus, Mountainview has become a school that provides specialized programming to students who are deemed unable to succeed academically at a “regular” school. Neither regarded Mountainview as being a “rough” school.

Old Reputations Die Hard

Mountainview has many different reputations. From the outside Mountainview is regarded as a school for the rough students and those lacking in intelligence. From the inside view, the view of those who have actually experienced Mountainview be they students, parents,
or administrators, the perception of the school is drastically different/differs greatly. Naomi’s
reflects on the complex nature of Mountainview’s reputation:

Naomi:  I think its [reputation] different in different places. It has a bad rap because of years ago and people haven’t let that go.
Interviewer:  ‘Years ago’, What was going on here years ago?
Naomi:  Bullying. It had a lot of weapons charges and bad stuff like that. It was a much rougher crowd. Plus people don’t understand vocations. They still think that to do a vocation or a trade you need to be, you know, not be very bright or you’re illiterate. And we have people here whose kids will be in a cooking class and their parents will phone upset, “She shouldn’t be doing that, that’s not her type of work. She needs to be doing academics” …Sometimes it’s hard for parents. But then, we’re also starting to get parents that just want their kids to come here, because once they start, especially ones who have younger siblings, then they start asking for the younger siblings to go here because you’re not as big and scary as what people thought.

Naomi did not work at Mountainview during the “rough” period and she speaks of it as being in
the past. It is not the reality she experiences at Mountainview. However, she is very aware of that
rough reputation because as her comments suggest, the rough reputation still exists. Because
Mountainview is a vocational school, a school that has a strong focus in trades-based programs,
the students who attend the school are dubbed with a similar reputation: not being very bright, or
being illiterate, in other words lacking intelligence. This perception holds power because as
Naomi shared, parents themselves are calling in because they fear that pursuing a trade such as
working in the culinary industry is not a good path for their child in comparison to an academic
route. These are parents who know their children are attending Mountainview because they
cannot handle the academic courses, yet the reputation of vocational and the pressure to have
academic-minded children obscures their vision. What is interesting is that once parents become
familiar with Mountainview, once their children have been in the school, they like it. Families
are attempting to have all their children attend the school because they recognize that the
rumours they heard, or the negative perceptions they held are unfounded.
In contrast, Harry suggested that if people knew Mountainview was a vocational school, its reputation would improve:

A lot of kids don’t want to come to the school because they think a lot of people think the school is a *bad* school. Being out in their community, I know that a lot of people have no idea that Mountainview is a vocational school. They just figure it’s a high school like any other high school…there’s a societal perception about what this school is about, and that if they come to this school they must be dumb.

While Harry and Naomi have differing outlooks on the impact “vocational” has on Mountainview’s reputation, it is clear that for those who are unfamiliar with the school, Mountainview is regarded as a school for the “not very bright” or “dumb”. For those who are familiar with the school, the perception is quite different. When I asked Ian how Mountainview is perceived he spoke of how the employers who partner with Mountainview’s co-op program like the students:

Well, I think unless someone’s kid has gone here or unless—most of our kids do co-op so they do a semester in the workplace and most of our employers have been employers with us for a long time. Most of them like our kids…So those people would think our reputation was okay.

Ian wanted to make it clear that it was not just employers who felt this way, “[a]n
yone who ha[d] been involved in programs or the product that [the] school makes…[were] very happy with it.”

What is clear from the participants comments is that exposure to the school makes the difference. In fact, it is more than just exposure or familiarity that seem to make the difference. People’s perceptions of Mountainview change when they develop a bond with the school’s community of teachers and students. Ian explains:

You know I think people who have really connected with people and kids here would say it’s not bad. People who don’t know that because there are kids who didn’t come here and went on to the regular high schools [who] tell their Mom and Dad, “That’s where the bad kids go.” That’s a very tough thing to fight against because every year, we get a hundred new Grade 9s but that means there’s ten thousand of their friends who didn’t come here going to regular high schools who are all telling their parents, “Oh yeah Joe
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couldn’t come to Riverside because he’s going to Mountainview.” And so in the parents’ mind that just means it must be a bad place where they don’t want their kid to end up.

Ian’s comments suggest that rumours spread by students have a large impact on the reputation of the school. Students do not want to attend because of Mountainview’s reputation as a school for the less intelligent and rougher students. They believe that if they have to attend Mountainview it must mean they are unintelligent or a more difficult type of student.

The participants hold teachers responsible for perpetuating the negative reputation of Mountainview. Both Ian and Harry accused elementary teachers of using Mountainview as a threat. Harry vented:

There’s a negative reputation that some people in the community have about this school that we’re a bad school, that we’re a tough school, a school full of dumb kids, something like that. And a lot of that is perpetuated by the students themselves because elementary schools do a horrible job, horrible job of communicating to them what we’re really about. Basically, in elementary the reputation is, “Oh you’re going to go to Mountainview.” It’s like a threat.

When I asked Harry to expand on why he thought they used it as a threat:

Harry: They are difficult to teach, a lot of the kids are difficult to teach.
Interviewer: And that’s used as a threat. I’m curious how they turn that into a threat.
Harry: “If you don’t do your work, then you’re going to Mountainview.” Teachers say stuff like that in elementary school.

Harry is suggesting that yes, the students at Mountainview are more difficult to teach but that does not mean they are rougher, or dumb and teachers should not be perpetuating this debilitating perception. Ian’s comments reiterate Harry’s point regarding elementary teachers:

Ian: And many elementary teachers in Elgin still threaten kid with Mountainview if–
Interviewer: Really?
Ian: Oh yeah. That’s quite stunning but it still happens.

There seems to be a very large disconnect between the reality of Mountainview and the perceptions of Mountainview. Teachers are not only perpetuating this negative reputation among
students but also among teachers. When I asked Aubree how she came to be at Mountainview, she shared how during the application process she was confronted by teacher’s negative perceptions of Mountainview. She shares her experience:

So I was teaching in Northvale, the population was dropping so newer teachers had to be sent somewhere else. Either you get placed or you apply to positions that are open, and there happened to be an opening here. And again, you hear about Mountainview’s reputation, “Oh Mountainview.” I can’t quite remember why, or what possessed me, I guess I was just applying to whatever was open.

Later on in our discussion I asked to return the perceptions of Mountainview. I was curious to know what people had told her about the school while she was applying, the impression she was given. She expressed the following:

I think it was more um, there are some rougher kids…I don’t know if that’s the right word but that’s the word that people use – rough kids – just like really challenging kids. And you have to know so much about Special Education, and IEPs, and all of this stuff that I didn’t really know…Just that the students have such diverse needs.

Aubree did not feel comfortable referring to the students as rough students but it is clear that this is a reputation that Mountainview holds. Her comment also illustrates how the teachers hold uneasy sentiments about Mountainview because it is a school where all of the students are in Special Education. Even among administrators Mountainview has a questionable reputation. Rachel’s introduction by administrators to Mountainview is analogous with Aubree’s introduction by teachers. When I asked Rachel whether or not the reputation she heard was good she stated, “No, no it wasn’t. But I didn’t care because I new the Special Education piece, I know what these kids are capable of, I’m comfortable with the program.” Once again, Rachel’s comments illustrate how there seems to be a misunderstanding of Mountainview, and it is centered on inaccurate perceptions of the students who attend the school. From their comments it appears that teachers are apprehensive to work at a school where every student is identified as a
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Special Education student, there are feelings of discomfort in regards to this type of student body.

Harry and Rachel both commented on how even at the Board level, Mountainview is misunderstood. Harry states:

Among the Board is, the word I would use that is most applicable to most, is “misunderstood.” A lot of people who’ve worked at the Board, like when we get new administrators they’re completely unaware of what we do inside this building. Right, and the Board for the majority, they don’t know what goes on inside this building until they come in and actually see what’s going on.

Harry goes on to explain how it is not until the administrators enter the building and experience the school that they begin to understand:

But it’s the people who are directly related who know what go on inside who go back and talk and tell people, and people go “Yeah, yeah, yeah.” But until they actually come inside and actually experience it...Every time we have a new Principal we try to tell them what they’re in for, but they have to live it, to know it. Our current Principal keeps telling the story of “Yeah, Voc 1, Voc 2 I kind of,″ But then she sat in a Voc 1 classroom for the first time and was like...“This is high school?” But then over time they saw the work of what goes on with the kids and was like “Whoa! This school does so much!” And they go out and spread the word...we go through that cycle every time. And these are people who know they’re coming in and knowing the building.

Harry’s perception of how Mountainview is perceived at the Board level is confirmed through Rachel’s experiences. In conversation with Principals and members of the Board, Rachel has heard many negative comments directed toward Mountainview. She tells the story of speaking with her superiors about the direction of her career in the school district:

You know, it’s funny because I thought this year they would move me because I’d been here four years. But they said, “Why would I move you because nobody else wants to come here.” And I’m thinking, That’s a rude thing to say. Seriously, I like being here, and I don’t mind staying but honestly, you don’t say stuff like that, I’m sorry.

Mountainview’s reputation of being a bad school still lingers. It haunts the school.

Mountainview is still, in many circles, regarded as a school for the rejects, as a tough, rough school.
The Influence of Administrators

Three of the five participants emphasized that administrators of Mountainview hold a great deal of sway or power in changing how Mountainview is perceived for the better or for the worse. Ian argued that the administrators hold the power in determining how much Mountainview is used as a dumping ground, that how much it is a dumping ground is dependent on the character of the administrator:

It is…dependent on the strength of our administrator and their knowledge, like if they’re good at reading the kind of kid that their neighbouring principal’s trying to dump on me, and if they make sure there’s a process followed to get the kid in where their IEP reflects a level that is suited to what we can offer them in a classroom, especially the academic side.

Ian regards the administrators as the safeguards of the teachers and students. It us up to the administrators to ensure that the right students are being allowed into Mountainview, and by right I mean students who will be effectively supported by the services offered by the school. Ian suggested that the reason Mountainview initially became a dumping ground was in part because the school “didn’t have administrators who were very savvy.” I asked Ian if he still considered Mountainview a dumping ground. He responded:

I think it’s better managed now, I think that the last – two principals were just a little firmer and more astute. Part of it is that they’re political positions, if they have aspirations to be more than a principal and they’re working with their other principal colleagues, uh, even though I may not like it I understand why Principal A might say to Principal B, “I will take this kid this time.” There’s nothing said but Principal B knows they have been done a favour. Principal A may come returning asking for some return in that favour down the road. So I mean that’s reality. That’s the system, its public and political and whatever else. So, I don’t know, I don’t think it’s as bad now.

Ian seems to find it difficult to answer the question of whether or not the situation has improved. What becomes clear from his comment is that Mountainview is still regarded by schools and administrators as a place to send those students they do not know how to deal with, regardless of whether or not the student would succeed at Mountainview. A lack of understanding in the
function and purpose of Mountainview exists within the education system. Also, Ian’s comments show that there is little that stands in the way of Mountainview being used in this manner. For now, the administrators seem able to stand up against the powers at be but this is temporary.

These same administrators will one day, not in the far distant future, be assigned to a different school. There is not a lot in the way of Mountainview being used as a dumping ground.

Aubree’s comments regarding the role of administrators on the impact of Mountainview’s reputation, while more positive, align with Ian’s. Aubree believed that the Principal, Andrea, had positively changed the reputation of the school:

“I think Andrea has really changed the reputation, because she kind of took on this mandate that she was going to get as many people in the building as she could. She started holding Superintendent meetings here. There’s always school tours going on. We host competitions. So, I think it’s better than it was.

In fact, it was Andrea’s reputation that was one of the main reasons Aubree chose to teach at Mountainview: “Andrea has such a good reputation, the Principal, that kind of made me want to come here too.” As one of two Vice-Principals, Rachel works closely with Andrea and shares her perspective on the work the administrators have been doing in order to improve Mountainview’s reputation:

“It has improved. Even in the four years I’ve been here, we’ve worked really hard… I think when we have all our Board activities, and our trades-based departments are putting everything on, and we have Superintendent meetings here, and we have our psychologists and social workers, and more of this happening, and we’re going more and more to the schools, they are seeing the positive that we’re doing. We’re out there fighting all the time… fighting for a good reputation… You are always marketing yourself, always, just to say you know what, we are a solid educational centre, and it needs to be looked at not as a babysitting service, not as a place to hold the kids. It is a learning environment first and foremost.

Rachel wants Mountainview to be respected. Rachel in conjunction with the other administrators, are working hard to improve the reputation of the school by bringing educators and future students into the school to experience it, to witness what the school has to offer. They work to
impress upon the visitors that Mountainview has something important to offer and is of value to the education system beyond a holding centre.

A New Reputation – Teachers’ Choice

Faced with a challenging reputation, I asked each of the participants how they would like Mountainview to be perceived. Their responses give a peak into the heart of this school and the internal drive of the teachers. Naomi responded that she wanted it to be known as “a school where we find something for everyone.” Why? “Because I believe everyone has something special and unique.” Ian wanted Mountainview to be seen as a school that empowered its students:

It’s a place where you can send a kid who is struggling with self-confidence, and we give them confidence. We make them feel like they’re a worthy person, that they have some skills, and that they can use those skills to do some things that will give their life some meaning, and shape and purpose and functionality.

His comment resonates with Naomi’s in that they both want people to recognize Mountainview as a place that helps students find their way and discover what wonderful things they bring to the world, what they have to offer. Harry’s response to the question was Socratic in method and impacting for me as the researcher for this very reason:

Interviewer: So what would you like the perception, the reputation of Mountainview to be?
Harry: Okay. An art’s high school. Does that have a negative reputation?
Interviewer: No.
Harry: No. That’s a different school right?
Interviewer: Um-hm.
Harry: Well that’s what I’d like us to be. A different school.

Like Harry, Aubree suggested that Mountainview should be regarded as a different type of school but with a unique twist. During her career in the culinary industry, Aubree specialized as a Pastry Chef. She wanted Mountainview to receive the same level of respect:
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It’s not a regular school. I don’t think it can be perceived as a regular school…it’s not, it’s specialized. I think I’d like it to be perceived as a specialized school because specialized doesn’t have negative connotations to it. Specialized is like we have different types of programming than an academic school, we have different types of supports in place.

Aubree regards the Mountainview as a place that is recognized for its outlook and for the unique programs that it offers. Each of the participants wanted the negative connotations removed from the school and they wanted it to be regarded as unique and special. They see this school as a place that offers unique programs and supports for a different group of students. They see this school as a place that offers students a chance to discover themselves and find a sense of purpose for their futures.

A Self-fulfilling Reputation

There is a caveat to Harry’s comment regarding the future of Mountainview’s reputation. Harry suggests that Mountainview’s reputation would continue on as is, as the school for the rough and unintelligent students because of the nature of the system:

Harry: Unfortunately, this school serves a hard-to-serve population that a lot of teachers have difficulty teaching. And the way the elementary school system is set up, um, they basically almost, it’s a self-fulfilling prophecy that we get a bad reputation.

Interviewer: Self-fulfilling in what way?

Harry: Well, you know. You have a class of 30 kids. Two of them don’t get the math, can’t get the math. They have a disability, an exceptionality around the math and so the classroom teacher doesn’t have time to modify and focus the program on these two. Its like “Oh, you guys are going to go to Mountainview.” So the class sits there and the two kids who aren’t getting the math, everyone in the class knows they aren’t getting the math…and they correlate the not getting the math, means your stupid, means you’re going to Mountainview.

Harry’s comment is powerful because it suggests that only when the system changes and perceptions of students change will the reputation of Mountainview change. What holds Mountainview back is societal views on the value of individuals with differing needs, a value on
those considered more academic, as well as views on how we address children and individuals more generally who require a greater amount of support than others.

**Community and Collegiality**

In spite of the fact that Mountainview has developed a negative reputation in the eyes of outsiders, the participants described how in reality, Mountainview is an unusually supportive educational community in which colleagues support each other and the students. This section explores how the participants describe the community of Mountainview; the source of this community in regards to where it stems and is necessary; and what fosters this community among the staff. In this section I explore the interrelation between the students of Mountainview, the support structures available to staff, and the staff’s pedagogical choices, with particular attention to how these result in the development of a strong sense of community.

**That Family Thing**

Very close bonds exist among the staff at Mountainview. When I asked Ian about the staff dynamics of the school, whether or not there were cliques, he responded:

I think most people have a place they have lunch and then some ways that sort of defines who you hang out with. That doesn’t mean those groups are fixed because you know we play floor hockey on Fridays and they aren’t necessarily the people I have lunch with. We work on committees together or coach teams together or run events together and those aren’t necessarily the people I have lunch with. We have departments and we meet, chew over things with people in our department, again they may not be the people I have lunch with.

The teachers of Mountainview are socially connected with each other outside of their classrooms and are connected with teachers outside of their departments. Allegiances to one social group or clique are not common. Ian is suggesting that each staff member is part of a variety of different social circles within the school.
When I asked Aubree what it was like to work at Mountainview she responded that the school was like a family: “It’s way more like a family than anywhere else I’ve worked.” Later on in our discussion of staff dynamics and supports at Mountainview, Aubree described Rachel, the Vice Principal as a mother figure:

Yeah, no you’ll see Rachel just show up at your door (laughing). Yeah, that’s what I mean, it’s like, she’s like a mom, she’s so hands on, and it’s so hands on. It just wasn’t like that at the other school.

I have not often heard teachers refer to their administrators as parental figures. In fact, I do not think I have ever heard of this before. I am more accustomed to hearing about tensions between staff and the administrators. That is not to say that Mountainview does not have its issues but it is clear from Aubree’s comments that there are very strong bonds among the staff. Aubree was not the only one to refer to Mountainview as a family. Her sentiments were reciprocated in the comments of the other participants. For instance, Rachel shared how Mountainview is like a second home: “This is family, they are my second family, and I actually spend more time with these people here than my own family. You know, you do need those connections.”

When I asked Naomi what it was like to work at Mountainview she spoke of how she loved coming to work:

It’s great. It’s the best job ever. I never don’t want to come to work ever, ever, ever, never have I not wanted to come to work. It’s very fun. We work with some of the best people in the world, very special group here. I really like it. And when you come from an outside industry, especially one where’s it’s very cold and cutthroat, and not a lot of teamwork, and then you come here and it’s teamwork, and it’s such incredible support, I really like it.

Naomi once worked in the type of cutthroat industry she describes and so for her this seems to be a nice change to say the least. I asked Naomi for her thoughts on how the community bonds are fostered at the school. She told a story about how she sought support from the school staff when her son, Graham was unexpectedly admitted to hospital in the middle of the night:
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Interviewer:  So how do you guys as a staff foster this community?
Naomi: I've no idea (laughing). I mean we gather, we communicate, and um, I think there are people that have just connected on certain levels and then once you have that, then working together, there's so much respect for each other. And I'll give an example, Graham...in the middle of the night, went to the hospital, [we were] up all night...I came in at noon [to Mountainview]. And Andrea [the Principal] said to me, “You didn’t have to come in.” And I said, “No, I just wanted to sit and talk to some people.” I just wanted to connect with the community here because they’re important to me too. I’ve made friends that will stay with me forever here, we won’t always be teaching here but when you find those connections in people.

Interviewer: So was it you wanted to come in to be able to feel that support or–
Naomi: Yeah. I wanted to come in for personal reasons, not for work. I just felt the need to kind of connect and put my feet on the ground and have people tell me that it was going to be okay.

Naomi trusts the staff and is close enough with the staff of Mountainview look to them for emotional support in time of crisis. The teachers care about one another.

When I asked Harry what he thought the relationships were like among the staff he described it as a tightly knit community:

Just based on my interaction with teachers from other schools and how, people who have been in this building and moved on elsewhere – to a person – describe the school as the most tightly knit school they’ve every worked in. They use words like community, things like that so, that’s, so taking their feedback, is that this is probably the most tightly knit community secondary school that there is in [the district].

Harry went on to explain that the school is not perfect. It has its tensions:

Are there personal conflicts among staff? Of course. Whenever you have 90 adults in a building some people aren’t going to get a long. Are there some staff partially isolated? Yes, there are, but for the most part the vast majority of the staff support each other and like I said, I think the relationships in the schools are for the most part very very positive. I’m not aware of any or very few significant conflicts between adult staff members that, for lack of a better term, are poisonous.

Harry’s comments demonstrate that this school has its faults. It is not a perfect school. There are disagreements and challenges but the staff dynamic, from Harry’s and other participants’ comments, is different. It is more positive and more closely connected. There is a different
energy at the school. Ian echoed Harry’s comments about how there are some tensions among
the staff:

I think there are always some tensions over, there are things we can disagree about
but I think most people are here because, a few people probably feel stuck here, because
they don’t feel confident they could get a job somewhere else so they’re just not
confident about that process, but I think most people stay because they like our kids, the
staff, and they like working with each other, they like not being isolated from each other.

From Ian’s comments it is clear that Mountainview has its problems just as Harry pointed out.
There are staff members at Mountainview who do not perhaps have such deep connections to the
community of the school or its students. However, for the most, in Ian’s opinion, the staff are
strongly connected and have a strong investment in the school.

_A Not So Small School_

When I asked participants questions about the staff dynamics of Mountainview, or how
the school functions, each of the participants attributed Mountainview’s success in creating
community among the staff and students to it being a small school. Aubree compared
Mountainview to the previous school she was employed at:

At the other school the departments didn’t even talk to each other really um,
because there were so many staff members. I didn’t even know some of the staff
members’ names whereas here I know everybody’s name. Oh yeah, and there was no, it
felt like there was no student accountability at the other school because it was so big that
people just seemed to get away with stuff. Whereas here, it’s so small that they kind of
have their hand on what’s going on with most kids and it just wasn’t like that at all at the
other school. The Principal at the other school, like how do you manage that many
students and that many teachers?

Aubree argues that the larger school she came from had a disconnected staff, a lack of
administrative support from the Principal and a lack of student accountability. Aubree believes
that it is because Mountainview is a smaller school that the staff are connected, the students are
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held accountable and the administrators have a strong grasp of what is going on in their schools and are able to ensure the needs of each student are being addressed.

Ian recounted how invigorating it was to help found Mountainview, to be one of the starting teachers:

You get to create everything from scratch, all the programs, all the committees, all the school philosophy, everything. Plus, you get to come to place where everyone chose to come, or interviewed to get in, so it’s a really special dynamic. It’s the tightest staff I’d ever worked with because there was 35 to 40 of us. We all knew each other really well after a year because we’d all done so many things, we’d had to create a school from nothing. You don’t think about it until you’re trying to do it. So yeah, it was a blast and uh, and you get that feeling that, Yeah I don’t want to go somewhere else and not have that experience, again, I’m sure [you have heard], we’re a small, we’re like an elementary school in terms of size.

Ian cannot imagine working anywhere else because he would miss the staff dynamic of Mountainview, which he attributes to its small size. Similarly, Harry attributes part of Mountainview’s uniqueness to its small size: “I think what makes us unique is…one, our size, we’re small, so when you’re small it’s easier to interact.” Once again, the size of Mountainview is the reason given for why the staff is able to connect with one another so much more than other schools.

Naomi spoke of how there was a sense of respect among the staff and when I asked her where that sense of respect came from, she responded:

I think we are united in our goals and I think we’re small enough that we can know each other. I think when you’re in a bigger school and you know more people, but I think we’re small enough that we know who everybody is and um, yeah, its just something that’s always been here.

Naomi is suggesting that because Mountainview is a small school it means that the teachers interact more, get to know each other, and thus bond and share common goals for the students. Thus, a cohesive staff community has developed. She believes that this close community has
always been at Mountainview because of its small size. Furthermore, she shared that when teachers leave Mountainview, they often regret it:

Naomi: Whenever I’ve talked to teachers that have left, sometimes for greener pastures, they’ve always, I’ve never met one yet that hasn’t regretted it.
Interviewer: Really?
Naomi: Nope.
Interviewer: Do they ever say why?
Naomi: They miss the community. They miss the closeness, they miss the smallness too.

Naomi’s comments suggest that staff regret leaving because of the smallness of Mountainview and the community that it creates among the staff as a result. Rachel echoes Naomi’s sentiments when she compared Mountainview to the previous school she worked at, Branchwood:

And honestly, I was at Branchwood, and because of how it was set up…it was by department, and sometimes you didn’t see anybody in other parts of the school whereas here it is a smaller school. By virtue of how it is set up, we do see people.

Rachel comments reveal that she sees the staff of Mountainview connecting with staff outside of the departments they are assigned to. She attributes this to the small size of the school.

Mountainview is not a small school despite what the participants suggest. Mountainview is a school with a student body of 400 to 600 students. This is not as large as a school with 1500 students but it is certainly not as small schools in the same district that have as few as 40 students. Yet, they all believe it is a small school, and they all believe that the reason there is a close community among staff is because of the size of the school. I set out to determine what creates this close community they describe if not the size of the school.

The Nature of the Student Body

The participants describe the students of Mountainview as different, as tougher, and that the students’ needs necessitate that staff work together. For instance, Ian described how
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Mountainview stood apart from other schools he has worked at as a result of the differing student needs at Mountainview:

Here, after two months you’ve met everyone because you’re struggling with the same kids so you go and talk. If you’re my colleague I’d say, “So what are you doing with Fred because I’m not doing anything that’s useful” (both laughing), “like if you’re doing something that works tell me, I gotta try.” And that’s sort of a reality here. We’re always asking each other what’s working because there’s no panacea for these guys. They’re very individual and although we have things that work for most of the kids there’s always some kids that nothing seems to work for and we’re all struggling…it’s a good place that way.

From Ian’s perspective, the student body of Mountainview needs more support and a different type of teaching than the students at other schools. From his comment it seems that the staff are willing to admit when they are not reaching the needs of a student. They tell one another when they need help and look to their colleagues for new ideas and techniques. Also, Ian suggests that the staff learns together. Sometimes they do not know what will work for a student and so they work as a team to figure out what to do.

Aubree shared a similar sentiment in regards to feeling like a member of a supportive, constructive learning environment. For instance, when I asked Aubree if it was difficult trying to break into the community of Mountainview she emphatically responded “No” and explained why:

Everybody just wants to share everything…Everybody here just has the same goal of wanting students to succeed. Everybody passionately cares about the kids here. That’s what I find. And so, I also think that because there are so many tough days, if you don’t lean on your coworkers like, you’ll die (laughing).

I was curious what she meant by “tough days” so I asked her to expand on this, what made it so tough to work at Mountainview. She responded:

I think it’s because there are so many kids here that carry so much baggage and have so much pain…I think because the kids have so much that they’re carrying, it just comes out in the classroom because they’re in a safe place. It comes out and you have to manage it, and you can’t manage it without [Educational Resource Facilitators], other teachers,
administration. So unless you have all these team people helping you manage it, you can’t. You cannot run a classroom with just you as a teacher…You’ll never teach a class where you don’t have some support which I think contributes to the community and the family.

Aubree’s emphasis on the need for connection among staff highlights that these students are not just bringing learning challenges, they are bringing their life challenges. These students feel safe at Mountainview, safe enough to open up and allow their teachers to see their baggage. A single teacher may not have the skills, the knowledge, the training to emotionally support students through working through their issues, and thus they need the support of fellow staff, and the expertise of teaching assistants, also known as Educational Resource Facilitators.

Rachel provided more insight into the various supports offered at Mountainview beyond casual conversations with fellow teachers or the guidance of administrators:

We have 30 teaching assistants which no other school has. You also…your [Guidance] Counselors. We have SR or the Support room, that’s very different from other schools. A lot of our kids…are there for most of the day working on their own…We have our Connect room for behaviours but we have staff who know the kids…We have our huge [Arbour Room] program.

Rachel mentioned five supports: Teaching assistants also known as Educational Resource Facilitators (ERFs), Guidance Counselors, the Support room, the Connect room, and the Arbour room. Rachel offered insight on what it meant for a student to be ‘Vocational 1,’ ‘Vocational 2,’ and ‘Applied’ at Mountainview:

Voc 1 is anywhere from like grade 1 to grade 4. Voc 2 they’re working at a grade 4 to a grade 6 or 7 level. The Voc 2 can go to college with upgrading. Your Applied level kids are grade 8, grade 9 level.

Thus, the students of Mountainview are those who require alternative approaches to academic work. The five supports Rachel listed are either individuals or special rooms within the school that students can be sent to for help with school work, for help with their behaviours, or to connect with staff that they feel comfortable speaking with.
When I asked Harry what it was like to work at Mountainview he described the team mentality of the school:

Mountainview’s almost like an inside-out school. Most traditional schools I would argue, the classroom is your domain and the rest of the school exists around you. Within Mountainview its basically a whole school approach and your classroom happens to be part of that if you’re a classroom teacher, if that makes sense.

The teachers are depicted as working like a team, in unison rather than in alone, independently in a classroom that they deem to be their private territory. I wondered if any teachers opposed this approach, because from my experience in schools, some teachers are protective of their classrooms, of their teaching space and practices. I asked Harry whether or not teachers resisted and he said, “No, because it’s not forced on to the teacher, it’s there if you want it.” I also asked Harry to expand on why it was not possible to work in isolation at Mountainview, without connections to other teachers and supports. He explained:

Because there, there’s so many variables with each individual student that its impossible. I mean, unless you build a strong one-to-one relationship with every single student in your class and you know virtually everything about every single student in your class then you can do it, but that requires so much time and effort and access to information that’s unbelievable.

When every student in the classroom has an Individual Education Plan, it means that they each will need a differentiated approach to learning. As Ian earlier stated, there is no “panacea” for these students. Harry is suggesting that to truly connect and help the students, a teacher cannot do it on their own. They have to look to one another for support and advice. They have to work as a collective or else, as Harry stated, they will burn out:

If you try to teach in isolation like some teachers do when they first come here, they all learn very quickly that you need to reach out and make these connections in order to be supported here…If you teach here in isolation I think you’d burn out really very quickly, oh my god.
Every time I read this comment and I am struck by Harry’s expression “oh my god” because even after over ten years of working at this school, the stress he feels in just imagining what it would be like to work in isolation – without the supports of teachers – is so palpable.

_A Shared Common Purpose_

The participants all care greatly about the students of Mountainview. When I asked Aubree what her hopes were for the students after Mountainview she expressed the desire for her students to have a joyful life:

- So–my particular kids, um, will never be able to be fully independent. But I just, for these guys I just want them to–be able to um, have an understanding of the world around them, to be able to have some joy. Like for them, when you constantly don’t know what’s happening it’s just, your anxious all the time, so I just want them to have some joy.

Her hope is that they have a life that they enjoy and find meaning from, and that makes sense to them. She went on to describe her hopes for their future relationships:

- I want them to have joy because they’ll never have a typical relationship with someone. They just won’t. But I want them to have–a relationship, I want them to have relationships with people that bring them satisfaction. Again the definition of satisfaction for them is so different from a typical person but I just want them to be able to navigate the world. I would like them to have employability skills. I don’t know what yet. I don’t know what their jobs can be. There are definitely things like stuffing envelopes. I’m sort of in the process of researching that a little bit–on where they can go but uh, I think it’s just you want people to enjoy life right?

Aubree wants them to have the best life that they can and a life that is a right fit for each of her students. It is not about creating a life for her students that is “normal” or like everyone else’s. Her focus is making sure they will live a life that is right for them and where they will have opportunity, support and healthy relationships.

Naomi expressed her hopes for students in very similar terms to Aubree. I asked Naomi what she thought the meaning of success was for Mountainview:
To be as self-sufficient as they [the students] can be, which for every student is something different. To be able to manage themselves, self-regulation, and to work, would be another thing, or have something meaningful to engage in, like, like something.

Naomi wants her students to be able to live the best life that they can live and that hopefully Mountainview will give them the skills they need for this to happen. They do not have the same expectations for each student, but rather differentiated expectations, expectations that match the needs and abilities of the individual. In response to the question of what her hopes were for the students, she reiterated the importance of self-sufficiency: “I hope that they’re happy. I hope that they feel good. I hope they go away with some skills, able to be as independent as they can be. It’s all about independence.” Naomi wants the students in her program to be able to learn skills that will be more in control of their lives.

This emphasis on teaching students skills for success was also expressed by Harry. When I asked him his hopes for the students of Mountainview he responded that he wanted them to be able to “function in the world safely and productively.” I asked him to expand on this and he described what his hopes were for students based on the stream they are in within the school:

Essential skills to be able to function in the world today is you have to be able to communicate, you need to have respect, you need to understand social norms…We’re teaching how to be respectful of people, how to communicate with people. So if you’re a Vocational 2 student my hope is that you can graduate from here, and get a job and hold a job and have the skill-set to maintain a job so that you can be somewhat self-sufficient. If you’re a Vocational 1 student that you can graduate from here, you may be going into assistive living but that you have the skill-set that you can advocate for yourself and communicate when you need something. For our higher end students who are capable of going to college, that they actually get into college in entry-level programs and then continue to work their way up there from there. So it depends on the different students but basically to become you know, as self-sufficient as possible given the tools the have in the real world.

Harry wants each of his students to be successful. His ideas of what are successful vary on the student but his hopes for each of them are the same in that he wants the students to gain the skills they need, based on their abilities, to live a good life, whatever that means for the student.
IAIN, shared the hope that the students of Mountainview will have positive relationships in life and gain the skills the need for employment:

I just hope they have those healthy relationships. I hope they can find a job that can sustain them. And a lot of our guys, especially the Voc 1s are not going to be employed, and that’s a challenge for parents.

Ian fears that that society will not be accepting of them and that they will not be given the chance to fulfill their potential:

You know I’m not a fan of [stores]. You know, I’m glad that guy is pushing the buggies but why is [the store] having him do that? It’s a good form of PR for them but I don’t really think they value him that highly. If they did they’d be trying to teach him other things besides pushing the carts. In two years I expect to see him stocking shelves, and using a price gun and that kind of thing. I bet I won’t. I bet I’ll see him pushing carts in two years. So then I start to question…Because if that was my kid at school I wouldn’t just start him on carts and hope he’s still doing that at the end of six or seven years of high school. I’d hope that we’re getting him to do a little more than that.

Ian does not like it when employers hire individuals with disabilities for minor jobs to suggest that the company supports diverse abilities. Ian fears that the company will not in fact regard the individual as capable because the individual will never be given the opportunity to climb the latter, to develop new skills and try out positions with greater responsibility. Ian is frustrated with employers who do not see students with disabilities as valued employees possible of personal growth and development. Ian wants society to value the students who attend Mountainview and he wants the students of Mountainview to be challenged. He wants them to develop skills and abilities that will help them in their future:

You have to recognize that the student begins in Grade 9 and then you want to see that they’ve made – whatever your continuum of skills is that you feel are valuable for that kid – progress on that continuum. Have they acquired some skills that they didn’t have before? Do they have more confidence, more independence then they did when they began school with you? And that’s progress.

Ian wants to make sure that the students grow and develop in their time at Mountainview.

Success means something different for each student, but ensuring that each of the students does
experience success is essential to Ian. Each student has skills and abilities that need to be accessed and strengthened.

When I asked Rachel what her hopes were for the students of Mountainview she responded:

That they are good citizens, honestly whatever that may look like. You’re a good person, you have values, good morals, you respect other people, you respect yourself, you have goals for yourself, you see life as being meaningful, because for some of these kids its not meaningful. They struggle everyday so if you can be that light for that moment for them, and you say, “What are your expectations for this student?” You know what, for many of them it’s just being here. School is not important to them, it can’t be important to them, there’s too much other stuff going on. So you make that connection. You have those meaningful people in your life that will try and guide you to the next step and yeah, that’s what it’s really about.

Like Ian, Rachel spoke about the importance of meeting students at wherever they are in their life journey and helping them move forward in a direction that suits who they are and their needs. Thus, it is clear from the participants’ comments that they all want to help their students gain the skills they need to live a life where they can build positive relationships, feel connected to a community, and be challenged. They want their students to leave Mountainview and experience success. Success may be different for each student but success for each student is the goal. Thus, what brings the staff of Mountainview together, what unites the staff is their shared sense of purpose for the success of their students.

*Freedom from Low Expectations*

A theme that emerged from the data was that Mountainview is a school that works to free its students from low expectations. For instance, Harry argued that what often bands the teachers together at Mountainview is to teach the students to believe they can learn: “We’re getting kids in that we have to reteach that, ‘Yes you can learn.’ Because a lot of them have heard that they
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can’t learn by the time they get here.” He went on to explain how the mindset of students changes from when they enter Mountainview to when they graduate:

They come here, walk in, its “I’m stupid, I can’t learn,” sort of thing, “I don’t know math,” and…then in Grade 12 they walk across the stage and they’ll tell you, “I came here and I thought I was stupid and I’m not stupid. I’m LD, I accept that I’m LD and but I can learn.”

Harry comments reveal that students walk into Mountainview often thinking they are incapable and unable to learn. When they arrive on the doorsteps of Mountainview they lack a belief in themselves. I asked Harry how and where students get the message of not being able to learn. He responded:

Because when you’re in elementary school with 30 kids and you’re the only two kids who aren’t getting the math, the teacher doesn’t have the time to focus on you, to teach you the way you need to be taught. The majority of the class is getting it and that’s good enough. So you go off to a Contained classroom or you sit in the class and you fail, or you just move along…without learning anything, and they learned that, “I’m just being moved along, everybody else is getting it, I’m not, I’m stupid, I can’t learn.”

Harry suggested that the education system is not meeting the needs of these students. Many teachers are unable to teach to the students who take longer to learn the material. Teachers often have to move on with the curriculum even if it means some of the students have not fully grasped the necessary material. Those students continue being the ones to do poorly and struggle to understand concepts and thus believe they are not able to learn.

Not only does the staff of Mountainview want their students to believe in their abilities, they want to challenge their students’ abilities. Naomi expressed this desire when she spoke of her frustration with the low expectations that are often set for students with disabilities:

Let them feel uncomfortable, let them fail, like, not fail but show them who they are, not set them up for failure…When something bad happens to them as a result of their issues, we say to them, “That sucks. Now what are we going to do?...We try to be straight to them because I think for so long they’ve been coddled and protected and nobody wants to make them feel bad.
NAOMI does not want them to fail. She wants them to learn and part of learning involves making mistakes and recognizing when adjustments in actions or approaches need to change. In her opinion, being too easy on the students will not help them learn or succeed. Rachel echoed Naomi when she stated “disabled is kind of the society piece, that we’re not allowing them to be the best that they can be.” Rachel emphasized the need to teach students to believe in themselves:

Many of the kids who come here know there are issues, a lot of them try to hide it…I think we try to teach them to be proud of who they are and the best that they can be. Whatever that might look like. It will look different for each and every person. You know, we have our grad tonight, and you won’t have a dry eye in the house.

She went on to argue for the need to teach students to be accountable for their actions:

Sometimes you know, [I tell them] “It’s your behavior. You own it. You’ll have a consequence. That’s life.” It should be progressive, again, you can discipline with love…it doesn’t all have to be harsh, and students will respect that and respond to that, but you have to set expectations. Nobody should be able to come and go and do as they please. That’s not life. So you are not preparing them for life, but there has to be that feeling of love and caring, respect, and we work hard at doing that.

Rachel’s comments illustrate her belief that each student should be held responsible for their actions and choices. Just because they have a disability does not mean that expectations for how they should act are to be lowered. In her opinion, if expectations are lowered, a disservice is being done to them; they will not be prepared for the real world.

Defining Disability

As educators in a school where all students are defined as disabled, I wanted to know what my participants thought of the label ‘disability’ of this label, how they perceived disability, as well as their thoughts on how society perceives the label of disability. I was curious to see what language they would use to describe disability; whether they employed language that enforced or challenged the perception of disability as a deficiency. To gain insight into their
perceptions I first asked, “how do you define disability” without providing any input or suggested definitions. I wanted to capture their initial response, what would come to their minds instinctively.

Once they had answered the question I provided an anecdote. I spoke of the presentation Aimee Mullins gave at the 2009 TEDMED conference, which I describe in chapter 1, in which she tells the story of looking up disability in her thesaurus one day, and finding the following entry:


I then read a quote from Mullins’s presentation to each of my participants that captured Mullins’s positioning of disability, her belief that society disables: “It was not the amputations that were disabling, but rather the societal labels associated with being ‘disabled’” (Mullins, 2009). Thus, I presented my participants with two opposing perceptions of disability: the thesaurus’ medical model and Aimee Mullins’s systemic/critical stance. I asked my participants to respond to Mullins opinions in order to learn how they perceived disability based on how they situated themselves in relation to these two opposing viewpoints.

Aubree

Aubree was initially unsure of how to respond to the question of disability. She struggled to come up with a response:

Aubree: Um, so I define disability as–oh that’s a hard question, um–
Interviewer: Take your time to think about it.
Aubree: Yeah.
Aubree: I define disability–as–when you learn in a different way, or you see things in a different light, or you–and hm–and, I, I guess in some cases it is a barrier? It can be a barrier–um–but it makes things more difficult. It makes
you have to—try harder—which can shape your character. Um, Yeah, I never, it’s funny, I’d never label these kids disabled. Like, I just, different? Yeah. But, yeah. Yeah I think, I’d have to probably come back to that, that’s all I can think of right now.

Here, Aubree is unsure of what to say. She does not know what words to use and is uncertain of what she thinks. For instance, she asks the question of whether or not it is a barrier: “I guess in some cases it is a barrier?” What Aubree is certain about is not wanting to frame disability negatively, for she suggests that it “can shape your character,” or in other words make you a better, stronger person. Overall, she did not feel comfortable settling on a definition.

Following Aubree’s initial responses, I moved on to speak of the TEDMED presentation. Aubree started to cry as I read her the thesaurus entry:

Interviewer: She speaks about how now she is into presentations and writing and she talks about how she always uses a thesaurus. And one day she just decided to, for the hell of it, said to a friend, let’s just look up disability in the thesaurus. She read it, and she said—well I’ll read it, “Disabled, crippled, helpless, useless, wrecked, stalled—

Aubree: Oh!

Interviewer: —maimed, wounded, mangled, lame, mutilated, run-down, worn-out, weakened, impotent—

Aubree: Oh my god.

Interviewer: —castrated, paralyzed, handicapped, senile, decrepit, laid-up, done-up, done-for, done-in, cracked-up, counted-out—

Aubree: Whoa.

Interviewer: — see also hurt, useless, weak. Antonyms are healthy, strong—

Aubree: Oh my gosh (crying).

Interviewer: —and capable.” And um, so she said that it was a 1982 issue and she looked up a recent one in 2009 and it turned out to be extremely similar. She was talking about how—you get chills when you hear that.

Aubree: (Crying) Whoa that’s amazing. That blows my mind. Whoa.

I was struck by Aubree’s response. It was moving. I also felt uneasy because I had not intended to place my participants in a position where they would feel this uncomfortable. When I introduced Mullins’s critical stance of disability, Aubree was intrigued:
Interviewer: She said that it was not the amputations that were disabling but it was rather the societal values associated with being disabled that were disabling.

Aubree: Say that one more time.

Interviewer: It, it was not her–amputations that were her limit, it was society’s attitudes toward it.

Aubree: Interesting.

Interviewer: And I don’t know, you were grasping there for a definition of disability and, and then after you hear that thesaurus entry, what does that–

Aubree: That’s just so outside of the mindset of this entire school. It’s just so the opposite (laughs), of what everyone thinks disability is. I think disability just means that someone needs something different to empower them, something different than an academic student might need. Yeah. Whoa.

Aubree rejected the thesaurus entry of disability because it is outside of her experience, her understanding and perceptions of her students. She wants nothing to do with it and in her eyes, neither does Mountainview. The claim that her students need “something different than an academic student” contains remnants of the belief that that there is a correlation between disability and low intelligence. It is difficult to determine if she believes this is or is simply employing the language of her profession, for the students who attend Mountainview, and in particular the students in her Gateway program, are deemed to be of lower intellectual ability. That is one of the reasons they attend the school. What is clear is that she perceives her students as requiring different tools or supports to be, as she states, “empower[ed].” Aubree does not perceive this as a deficit, or as a lack of capability, but as something that is simply different.

Rachel

Unlike Aubree’s initial struggles to define disability, Rachel was quick to respond, and confident in articulating her views. Rachel believed that “there is a difference between disability and being disabled.” Even before I introduced the thesaurus entry and Mullins’s critical stance, Rachel argued that society disables. She referenced a movie and shared stories of her family to substantiate her point:
I remember the line in there, and he said, in this movie, “You have made me disabled. I was born with a disability but I am not disabled.” So disabled is kind of the society piece, that we’re not allowing them to be the best that they can be. The disability, as much as it’s factual, should not hinder you. So, I look, to my own brother, born with CP. He had the physical disability. He was hit by the milk truck when he was 9. Was blind. That same year he drowned, was brought back to life, which also caused more brain damage. And I remember my father always saying to him, “You have a disability, you aren’t disabled, you can do things, and you can be productive.” To do this day, oh yeah he has seizures. He has his own life, he has his own house which he built. He has worked independently. He cuts grass in the summer, shovels snow in the winter. He cuts wood to sell to the tourists in the summer, and it works for him. And he is so accepted in that neighbourhood… and received a provincial award for his volunteer hours and making a difference in other peoples’ lives.

Clearly, Rachel does not see disability as a barrier to making a difference in life or feeling a sense of purpose and fulfillment. Her brother has his limitations but he is self-sustaining, he is happy with his life, and accepted within his community – this is what matters to her, this is what she deems to be important. She does not want a label to limit an individual’s perceptions of what they are capable of doing. She argues that the low expectations of others are what limit an individual with a disability. Thus, she believes society disables through its confining views of what disabled individuals are capable of doing. In this regard, she seems to align more strongly with the critical views of disability rather than with the deficit model. It is still unclear however, of what she thinks a disability is. She explicitly defines what it means to be disabled but not what it means to have a disability.

Rachel seems to suggest that having a body that is not ‘normal’ is a disability. Her brother had a disability because he had CP, was blind, had incurred brain damage, and experienced seizures. Also, whether she recognizes it or not, inherent within Rachel’s argument is the suggestion that the goal of life is to be normal, and live like the norm. She suggests that people who have abnormal conditions should not be limited, because when they are not limited they can live a normal life. Her brother, despite being blind and having CP is able to cut wood,
and build a house. In other words, if we limit our expectations of individuals with disabilities, with abnormal conditions, they will not be able to rise above their disabilities, they will not be able to have the chance of overcoming them and living a more normal life. Determining a person’s value based on whether or not they ‘overcome’ a disability suggests that the disability is in fact disabling, that a disability is in fact a lack of or a deficiency in something that should be overcome in order to be more ‘normal,’ or more complete, more capable. Disability becomes a negative, something the individual is fighting against.

Once again, what is most important to Rachel is that her students believe they are capable, and that they are not limited but societal perceptions. For example, when speaking of Mullins’s claim that societal labels are disabling, I asked Rachel if she felt students brought these limiting societal perceptions with them to Mountainview. Rachel gave an emphatic yes, and shared the following:

They have had this their entire life, I mean really and truly they have. And if something is going wrong, they say, “Oh miss, I’m so stupid.” No you’re not. You’re not stupid. You have a different way of learning. You are not stupid. I’ve had to tell them all, “I’m a mathematical moron, don’t even ask me for math help, you will know more than I do.” [and they respond] “really? And you’re the Vice Principal?” I said, “See there’s hope for you. You know, they took me, They’ll take you.”

Low expectations and a lack of hope are Rachel’s primary concerns. In this way, she fights for the empowerment and success of her students. However, her use of language reveals hints of a more medical, negative perceptions of disability.

Naomi

Naomi was very emotional during our discussion of how disability is perceived. When I asked her to define disability, she was both resistant to answering the question and yet passionate about her opinions on the matter:
Oh! I might not be the one to, to talk to about this, um. The disability for me is in the eye of the beholder. Not in the person. The problem is the person that’s, yeah. I, I don’t even know how, that’s not even a fair question (starting to tear up; both laughing).

Naomi is uneasy with the word disability and its negative connotations. She does not believe that a disability refers to some innate deficit or lack of ability. She denounced the word disability and instead preferred to refer to individuals as having differences:

I don’t even, I don’t like the word, for me the word is differences, people have differences, not disabilities, they’re all differences. I don’t, I have a different opinion because I have family who, it’s being different, it’s not being disabled, and because of your differences you have strengths in other places.

This topic is personal to Naomi. When I mentioned that Mullins (2009) suggests society is the disabler, Naomi reiterated her point that disability is in the eye of the beholder and clarified what she meant by this:

Yeah, that’s why I say its in the eye of the beholder, not in the person with the difference...And how you break down those barriers? I have no idea. But it’s somebody putting their views on you, because they’re looking at how you’re different instead of what you’re able to do, what your strengths are. And one of our students, whose about as low verbal as we have, but is in like Grade 11 piano, or whatever, and can play anything by ear and so that student’s disabled? That’s not disabled, like yeah—he’s gifted that’s what he is.

Naomi did not like being asked the question; she did not like the question itself because she did not want to define her students as disabled or not disabled. While not stating it explicitly she argues that in calling someone disabled, in focusing in on what they cannot do, we miss the three-dimensional quality of a human being. We miss out on the total essence and character of the individual. We do them such a disservice. Of all the participants, Naomi resonated the most with the critical stance in both her perceptions of disability and her use of language.
Harry

Harry does not like the word disability. He was very clear about his disdain for this word and immediately began brainstorming other words that better represented his perceptions:

I don’t like the word disability. I like the word exceptionality better. It’s a better word than disability. To me disability is something um, that is part of your make-up that differentiates you from the norm. Uh, what I mean by that is for example, learning disabilities, you learn something differently. Doesn’t mean you can’t learn it but you learn it differently. And quite often because you learn it differently it takes longer and it is a slower process right? So it basically impacts the speed of picking something up. That’s basically what I would, something that requires a modification in the way we teach you, I would define as you having an exceptionality.

I later asked Harry to clarify why he preferred to the word exceptionality. He explained that to him, “disabled…means deficit and [he doesn’t] think a disability is necessarily a deficit” whereas “exceptional means different.” Harry presents conflicting viewpoints in his attempts to define disability. He makes it clear that he does not like the negative perceptions of disability. He does not want to see individuals identified with the label of disability as lacking in some quality. It makes him uncomfortable. However, he contradicted this very point when he suggested that having a disability means being different than the norm. The medical model of disability is dependent on the perception that there is a normal way of being and thus an abnormal way of being. In suggesting that disability is “part of your make-up that differentiates you from the norm” Harry implied that there is an inherent abnormality in individuals with disabilities. Harry clearly cares for his students. He does not want them to see their difference as something that inhibits them from being successful. Yet the language he used, for example, his reference to the ‘norm’, suggests that his conceptualization of disability is informed and impacted by the deficit model of disability.
Harry did not hold a high opinion of Aimee Mullins. His reasons reveal his perceptions of disability. Before I even introduced the thesaurus definition of disability or Mullins’s opinion, he expressed his frustrations with her actions:

Interviewer: Are you familiar with TED Talks?
Harry: Yes.
Interviewer: Because there’s one by Aimee Mullins and she has two amputations and she talks about, she starts off her TED Talk, I found it really interesting
Harry: (Deep intake of breath).
Interviewer: Have you seen this one?
Harry: Yeah I do. I don’t agree with her all the way. She’s the one, she’s got the blades?
Interviewer: Yeah.
Harry: Or, or the artificial legs?
Interviewer: Yeah.
Harry: Okay. Yeah, I think her disability, her exceptionality, isn’t her physical disability. I think her exceptionality is her perception.

I soon realized that he was referring to a different TED Talk than I was referring to, but I wanted to see what his train of thought was, so I asked him to expand on the statement that her exceptionality is her perception:

Interviewer: So what do you mean by that?
Harry: Um, what struck me about her, wasn’t her physical disability, it was her neediness to look good. So she has legs made extra long. For physical appearances sake. You understand what I’m saying? She’s feeling the need to look exceptional--

Interviewer: Oh, okay.
Harry: Right? You hear what I’m saying here?
Interviewer: Yeah, I think so.
Harry: So, it’s kind of hard to describe. I remember sitting next to somebody having this conversation, hearing that going on, and I said those exact words, “Her lack of legs is not her exceptionality, her exceptionality is her perception of herself and what she feels that she needs to project.” Right? That’s her real barrier and I don’t think she’s dealt with that barrier yet.

At first I was surprised by Harry’s response because it sounded as if he did not like that she was displaying her legs. However, that was not his point. He is suggesting that her barrier is that Mullins feels the need to be perceived a certain way by society, and that she sees her amputations
as a barrier to being perceived that way. In essence, he is accusing her of being over-focused on looking normal, on being perceived as beautiful *despite* her amputations, that she can look beautiful even with amputations. It would seem then that Harry is arguing that Mullins needs to accept who she is, that she needs to accept her amputations and that it means she is different than other members of society. Later on in our conversation he emphasized this point when he stated “her, disability or her exceptionality is her awareness of how she thinks other people perceive her.” Harry thus argued that her disability was not her amputations but rather how Mullins allowed what she thought others thought of her to control how she perceived herself. To put it simply, Harry was frustrated that Mullins does not accept herself for who she is but instead allows her perceptions of what people think of her to control her.

Having gained Harry’s initial insights on Aimee Mullins, I explained that I was referring to a different TEDTalk in which she argues that societal perceptions of disability were what impeded her, not the amputations. I asked Harry to respond to her argument:

**Interviewer:** So what do you think about what she says about her amputations not being disabling but rather societal perceptions? In relation to the students here at Mountainview.

**Harry:** Well I don’t think a lot of the students are aware of the societal perceptions. I would say that their exceptionalities are more true exceptionalities than hers because they’re actually impeding, uh, they’re a barrier for them living a life the way they could live their life.

**Interviewer:** Hm.

**Harry:** So from the students I can see that, that there’s a societal perception about what this school is about, and that if they come to this school they must be dumb. That is one issue, but for our kids I don’t think that’s a primary exceptionality. I think the exceptionality is actually regarding disability, that is their exceptionality because it is impactful on their lives. Yes.

Harry imposes a hierarchy of disability. Harry argues that Mullins does not experience disability as much as the students at Mountainview because her amputations do not prevent her from living a good life. Her artificial limbs give her access to the world. Harry believes that his student’s
TAKE THE DIS OUT OF DISABILITY

have a greater disability because their differences prevent them from having that same level of access.

Perhaps Harry is suggesting that the students of Mountainview do not have technology like artificial legs that take them from being disabled to living a more ‘normal’ life. However, this in itself assumes that disabilities require solutions. What I did not ask Harry was why he thought their differences were barriers or why their differences were an impediment to their lives. His responses suggest that he may not have thought about how society may in fact be what imposes these barriers to living life rather than the difference itself. However, what needs to be remembered is that his immediate reality at Mountainview is that the students’ disabilities are barriers for them. The reason, I would argue is that society does not have a place for individuals with different bodily experiences and expressions of self. I do not know if Harry would agree or disagree with this. However, what is clear is that he does not want to associate disability with deficit and yet he seems to be doing just that.

Ian

Of all the participants, Ian’s perceptions of disability were the most difficult to untangle. At the beginning of the interview I reiterated the purpose of the study and what drew my attention to Mountainview. As I described how François had described Mountainview as a place where teachers do not burn out as much, Ian interrupted me to contradict this statement. He believed that it was difficult to teach at Mountainview because of the type of students they taught. Ian tried to communicate to me how these students were different:

I always describe our kids as socially disabled first because as you probably know if you’ve done researching or reading, students with LD or any learning disability, one of their first flaws is they misread or have difficulty reading social cues. So they’ve done, you know, guys in prison, and walk into a room and read an expression like yours and right away assume that it’s aggressive and so now they’ve already created an antagonism
in the situation that wasn’t there, but it’s how they’ve perceived the person and misread it.

He went on to explain that these students are at risk of going to prison because of their difficulty with communication:

Ian: Some of them will end up in prison for that exactly that reason. They’ll misread a situation or worse, punch someone, and off they go. I think that eighty percent of the guys in prison have a learning disability of some sort.

Interviewer: I didn’t know that.

Ian: Yeah, so if they could find a fix for that, not that we wouldn’t have the need for prisons, but fewer people would be making those bad decisions, reactive decisions that, you know end up in that place, and it’s self-confidence. You know, a lot of guys in prison are there because of drug and alcohol use or things they did while they were on drugs and alcohol. And you know, a lot of people that’s because they’re propping up some lack they have in their own, you know, it would help, but we haven’t found that perfect fix yet so, we chip away.

Ian views disability like a disease. The student and disease are two separate entities and the disease gets in the way of the student’s success. Their disease leads them into situations they could have otherwise easily have avoided. If the disease could be removed, or cured, or fixed, the student would be free from the barriers they face. Their risk of being in trouble with the law would diminish if the no longer had their disability, their disease. Ian feels sorry for his students. He wants to help them but seems at a loss because society has yet to find the necessary fix that would eliminate the risk of his students going to prison unnecessarily. It is as if their disease is an injustice. And so, he helps to “chip away” at the problem, at helping his students overcome their inability to understand important social cues. This is a somber perspective.

When I asked Ian to define disability he thought it was too broad of a question. I prompted him to respond with as specific or as broad of a statement as he desired. He responded:

Um–I think, when you think of a disability you think something that is an impediment to doing most of the normal things without a struggle, however you define those normal things…We all have things we’re not good at. We all have things that we don’t enjoy doing or we find very hard or difficult task to do. That doesn’t mean we have a disability
we just may mean we’re not good at it. We way just not like doing that thing…I think a true disability is something that–impacts many things that you attempt to do so many areas of your life are more difficult or more challenging because of that disability.

Ian reiterates the perception that disability is an impediment to being able to do what is considered normal within our society. Ian’s description of Mountainview’s students, and his response to the question of disability are saturated in the perception that disability is a deficiency. However, Ian’s commentary on Aimee Mullins’s TEDTalk revealed a more three-dimensional, nuanced perception. He critiqued society’s tendency to label and categorize:

[Interviewer:] Mullins] talks about how she was never familiar with that [thesaurus] entry as a kid, her experiences in life, her amputations she felt were not what was disabling but it was the societal structure–

Ian: People’s perceptions.

[Interviewer:] —or labels.

Ian: Exactly. And that’s, you know, when you asked about Mountainview’s reputation, that in a way is disabling for some of our kids, because then they don’t want to, [they say] “I don’t want to talk about the school I’m at because I already believe peoples perception in the world are not positive and that undermines my self-esteem because I’m going to the place.” I guess that’s common to all societies, we like to box things and label things because it makes it safer and more secure or whatever if we can have a reliable definition of different things. At the end of the day life isn’t like that. Its very fluid and changing and unpredictable, so, it’s nice to have those set definitions but they rarely apply.

Ian suggested that labels such as disability are inaccurate because they do not capture the complexity of human nature and ability. He stated that we try and create labels and boxes to define our students but in reality those labels and boxes do not apply because human nature is ever changing; like life, humans are every “changing and unpredictable.” This is a very different tone then Ian’s prior comments. He articulates an idea that is very critical of societal perceptions of difference. No other participant responded in this manner.

I was curious to know if Ian had every heard of critical disability theories, or of this idea of thinking critically about disability. To try and find out, I asked him how he helped the students
of Mountainview think critically about what it means to have a disability. He responded that he “offer[s] them opportunities to tell each other about their disability and how it challenges them.” His response demonstrates that he is most likely unfamiliar with the critical disability theories. Allowing students to share their experience and share what accommodations help them is great but this type of conversation does not address the systemic issues of the label of disability. Thus while he articulates ideas that are imbued with a critical stance on our society and its perceptions, he has not yet brought this into his classroom.

My expectation in asking my participants to define disability was to initially to determine if they held either a more medical/clinical perspective of disability or a critical perspective. What I learned is that this should not be the objective because it is not one or the other. Ian for example, made comments that suggest a strong orientation with both the medical perception and the critical stance. His comments are incongruous. Just as Ian argued that we cannot box in our students, so too can we not box in these educators.

_A Disabling Reality_

I was struck by a discussion I had with Naomi regarding how they support students with Autism at Mountainview. Naomi spoke of how they are upfront with their students:

> We don’t pull any punches. We say to them, “You have Autism. Because you have Autism, these are the things about you”…we’re very direct, we do not lie to them. Many of the students of the program that I’m in, it’s the first time, few of them, it’s the first time they’ve been told they have Autism because how can they help themselves if they don’t know themselves?

Naomi’s concern is ensuring that her students know themselves. For her this means teaching them to claim their identity, to learn what it means to have Autism. She went on to explain how the students react to being told they have Autism and the types of behavioural programs they use:
We are very honest with them. Because often they don’t want to have Autism. We say, “We can’t help you do that, but we can help you manage the things about your Autism so that it’s not as obvious,” and we will do that by video-taping them and showing it to them. Some people totally disagree with that, I mean you have to do that carefully. But how are you going to tell someone they have a repetitive behaviour?

Videotaping the students to help them change their behaviour does not sound good, but Naomi argued that it makes a difference in the lives of her students. Being honest with the students and teaching them through videotaping how to change behaviours is greatly appreciated by the students:

Other people will disagree and say, “That’s mean.” How else are they going to learn? They’re literal people, I can’t tell them a fictional story, I need to help them now and they come back and say, “Thank you, help me with this” and then they come back and say “HELP me with this!” Right?

Naomi is clearly connected with her students and they trust her. They find in her a person who is willing to be upfront with them. They trust the teacher to confront them and tell them how they are behaving because the students want to fit in. Naomi’s perception is that she is empowering her students with the knowledge of their disability and giving them the tools and strategies they need to adapt. In theory these students should not have to adapt nor have to change in order to fit or mimic what society deems to be normal. However, in order for the students to physically survive in the society outside the realm of school, the teachers must teach them how to fit within this society.

In her dissertation on the misperceptions of Autism, and the reclaiming of this identifier by students with Autism, Beth Myers (2012) explains how Autism is constructed as abnormal:

Much of the current research on autism is from a deficit or biomedical/neurological model. In fact, the diagnosis of autism requires the indication of a “triad of deficits” encompassing social, communication, and behavioral skills in relation to what can be considered “normal”; the diagnosis of autism relies on a definition of typicality and a deviation from that norm. (p. 6)
Autism, like the label of ‘learning disability’ implies a difference from the norm. Thus, the teachers of Mountainview are restrained by the system they are working in. As much as Naomi is trying to teach her students with Autism to be self-advocates, and that they are three-dimensional people, a lot of her efforts are to try and help them act like ‘normal’ people, people without Autism. She has to prepare her students for the real world. What this often translates into is teaching students how to act and function like ‘normal’ individuals.

A Segregated School

Mountainview Collegiate Institute is a segregated school in that it only teaches students who have been institutionally designated with a “disability”. The participants described challenges and advantages to segregating students with disabilities. The participants all argued for the continuation of Mountainview as a segregated school and feared that it would be closed due to recent closures of vocational schools. In this section I explore why the participants are adamant about the need for Mountainview to stay open and to offer a segregated educational environment for students with disabilities. I pay particular attention to the correlation the participants make between Mountainview’ segregated nature and the life chances and success of their students.

Hope for Continued Segregation

When I asked what his hopes were for the school, Harry argued that it was imperative Mountainview remained a separate, segregated school. He feared that Mountainview would be amalgamated with a non-vocational school which seemed to be the direction educators were pushing for:

What are my hopes for Mountainview? That we get to continue to be what we are. I always hope that we’re better understood…what our role is. [They] just closed
down...two vocational high schools and they said “Oh, we’ll just roll them into this end of the school” and this is from people who truly don’t understand the vocational environment. You can’t pick up Mountainview and stick it on a wing of another school, and expect it to function the way it functions.

Harry does not want Mountainview to be amalgamated. He argued that if Mountainview is joined with another school, the opposite of integration will occur:

Because then you become a marginalized population within that school, and we don’t want to be a marginalized population that happens to occupy a wing because those kids need something different...We want to be a viable alternative school on equal footing.

Harry suggested that Mountainview is a place where the students do not feel like they are the minority. Harry explained that he did not always hold this sentiment:

Harry: I was not a fan, a supporter of necessarily a fully segregated voc[ational] environment. I favoured the integrated model more. But after working here, I’ve completely 180’d.
Interviewer: So why is that?
Harry: Because I think they get more opportunity, more learning, and it’s actually a better environment when they’re segregated like this because we can actually set them up for the real world better coming out of a segregated environment rather than having them isolated and marginalized in an integrated environment. We can focus on them, directly teach them what they need to be taught on a mass level.

Being the majority in the school means that their needs are paid attention to. If they were the minority their needs would not necessarily be the priority. When their needs become the priority, programming is constructed for their needs not someone else’s. Harry argues that because the school is segregated its expertise is offering the differentiated programming that these students need to receive an equitable education:

A regular school I would argue is focused on the top 90 percent or even more callously on the top 40 or 50 percent...Here we’re focused on virtually everybody. Whether you’re going to university, college, um, certificate program, you still get the same amount of care and attention. Whereas my impression of a regular school is even though lip service is, “Oh no we treat all of our kids equally,” uh, reality is those who are on a postsecondary path have way more opportunities than those who aren’t.
TAKING THE DIS OUT OF DISABILITY

Harry does not want the students who attend Mountainview to be treated as less important than the academic students. He wants the students of Mountainview to have equal importance in the eyes of administrators and teachers.

Rachel was just as adamant as Harry regarding the need for Mountain to remain a separate, segregated school:

I do not think that these kids should be integrated. They get lost, they don’t have the supports. They don’t have the connections, and like it or not, they are not the same…we’re building them to have a future. And you know it looks good on TV where they’ve dressed up the Down Syndrome boy and made him the prom king. Well I mean that’s all fine but what’s happening after, you know? Seriously. I think we need schools like Mountainview more and more…we need places like this and that is my hope that…we do not sell these students short of what they actually deserve…we need schools like this.

Rachel suggests that our society, while it claims to be in favour of integration does not actually understand what it means to support the needs of individuals with disabilities. She does not want integration for show, where classes have a token disabled student to present a picture of equity and acceptance when that student with the disability is not in reality being cared for.

Rachel expressed the opinion that society, while it claims to be pro-integration, is not in fact at the point where it is ready for it: “I think a lot of people talk but they don’t follow through with the walk. It seems to be the appropriate little charity to get involved with.” Rachel believes that while the government and education system is doing lip service to the importance of integration, Mountainview is following through on ensuring these students’ needs are met: “You know the government is saying, ‘blah blah blah blah,’ and that’s fine we need that. But this [school] is in the trenches everyday, and this is making that difference.” Rachel believes that Mountainview is making the difference that the pro-integration movement is fighting for. However, Rachel was concerned for Mountainview’s future:
Provinces are closing more and more of them, that’s the whole thing. We’re becoming the minority, which is really sad. It’s very sad. And you don’t just have the money that goes in here that needs to be here… You know, you’re always fighting for money, always. And you know what, these kids deserve better, they do.

Rachel does not want to see Mountainview close but if that is her province’s prerogative she does not have much choice. Her comments also reveal that Mountainview needs more funding to keep it at its best for the students but is struggling to acquire it.

When I asked Ian what his hopes were for Mountainview he also shared concerns about funding:

I mean, I like the idea of hands-on stuff, the perennial problem is that because its publicly funded, what’s in those shops doesn’t get replaced every two years like in the private sector, it’s going to be replaced every 20 years if we’re lucky.

Ian was concerned that if Mountainview does not receive the necessary funding it will not be able to maintain the specialized programs it has to offer. Ian was also concerned about Mountainview being closed for the sake of its students:

I hope it continues to exist because I think we need places like this for some of these students. We’ve had this sort of thing swallowed up in a regular high school and some of them would just stop going to school, I don’t think they would feel there was much point after awhile.

Interestingly, Naomi expressed the same concern:

I hope that we continue to grow and maintain our numbers. [The population] is declining in [this part of the city] so it is very scary about what they will eventually do with us…I can’t imagine that they would ever send these kids back into their home schools because that’s not going to work. I hope it does continue to be here. It’s just uh, yeah, I think it’s a great place.

Both Naomi and Ian want the school to stay open because they believe the students of Mountainview would not excel in the learning environment provided by a regular school.
Aubree’s hopes for Mountainview differed from the other participants. She did not seem concerned with Mountainview closing but rather more filled with a desire to keep being a part of its growth:

Interviewer: So what are your hopes for Mountainview?
Aubree: Um, hm. I don’t know. I don’t think I’ve really thought about what my hopes are for the school. I hope that it kind of continues on the path that it’s on. Like I hope that all the technical programs continue to…I just hope, it has to evolve, but I just hope the bones of it don’t change very much. I think the way the school is really good, and things may have to be tweaked but I hope it kind of stays as it is.

Interviewer: And those bones being like–
Aubree: The bones being like the programs, the class sizes, like the, I know there will be a change…but I like the feel of the school. As weird as that sounds. I like the um, there’s just a good energy in the school, you know?

Thus, the participants collectively argued that what sets Mountainview apart, what makes its existence necessary, is that it caters to the needs and abilities of its students, a set of students that in a regular school would not receive this amount of care.

It is a Bubble Preparing Students for Reality

Each of the participants seemed to have a strong investment in the school. I wanted to challenge them on whether or not the school was actually being successful in its goals: was it effectively setting up students to be successful in the real world? Was it a bubble or utopia for these students? Ian offered insight into how Mountainview works to connect students with external support agencies:

In our counseling program, they have a ton of things, like let’s say the kids two years from graduating. They will try and get the parents to come in…and they actually have workshops they can attend as a family. And they start to show them the possibilities, the community organizations that exist out there that their child could access and participate in…that help you find jobs.

Mountainview thus helps students find supports offered by their local communities.
In response to the question of whether or not Mountainview is a bubble and/or utopia,
Naomi responded:

Maybe a little bit. It’s a happy and a safe place which is why a lot of our Vocational 1 kids stay for seven years. They stay until they’re 21. But the thing is, they may have that kind of support in Grade 9 and 10 but we start to pull it back in 11 and 12. It’s like a behaviour therapy program, so they start to become more and more independent, but yeah. I still believe they are better people at the end, and they’re walking away with skills. They’re walking away with something. They feel better about something.

Naomi admitted that in some ways Mountainview can be considered a bubble because students feel at ease. An example of how they teach students to be more independent is that “in Grade 9 they don’t allow students to go out for lunch. In Grade 10 [they] do let them go out for lunch.”

Harry echoed Naomi’s comment that in the earlier grades more support is provided compared to the upper grades:

The first two years, 9 and 10, is basically, gain the kids confidence back, “Yes you can.” We start to teach them these skills. And then [in Grades] 11, 12 we transition these kids out of Mountainview into the real world.

Harry stresses that students are prepared for life after school largely because of the cooperative education program and the trades-based programs offered at the school:

They get exposure to the real world work experience through the co-op experience, where they can fail and it does have some consequences but not huge consequences. Like, “Okay pick yourself up, dust yourself off, try a new placement,” sort of thing. And that’s a harsh awakening for some of the kids. I mean we have a lot of kids who come back for their 5th year and their 6th year until they figure it out…Plus our shops, a lot of them are really real-world experiences in the classroom, so they’re experiencing things in shops that when they see the real-world, “I’ve seen this before, I’ve gone through this before in my [auto] class…[I’ve faced] the pressure of a deadline…So they’re not stepping out of here in this bubble and getting this shock of “Oh this is what real life is.”

While Harry suggests that the vocational programming offered at Mountainview effectively prepares its students for the working world Aubree questioned how effectively Mountainview prepares its students:
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I think that sometimes [Mountainview] is [a bubble]. I struggled with that when I was [teaching my trade]. I was really kind to my students and in [my] industry people are not kind but I didn’t know any other way to be. I mean, I worked for [industry professionals] that made me cry. I ran away in private and cried because they were, they were just mean. And so, when I teach these kids, and some of these kids were going into apprenticeships, are they going to be able to handle it when somebody yells at them?

Aubree is concerned that students are not being prepared for the pressure and criticism they will face in her industry area. However, she goes on to question whether this is a realistic criticism to have with the type of students who attend Mountainview:

But I don’t know how else to be. Like this is, this is where we are supposed to be building their self-esteem. So all I can hope is that we can build their self-esteem enough, that when they leave, that when they do face that, that they are able to deal with it because they have enough faith in themselves…But I do, I do think that that is sometimes the case, that this is a bubble. But um–I mean, these kids already think that they can’t do things. There’s kind of a fine art of building up someone’s self-esteem while at the same time being really strict and being a bit detached and I think that that really comes with experience I think? Yup.

Aubree’s comments illustrate her desire to be a teacher that helps her students succeed in the real world. She suggests that while the classroom experience of these students may not align with the experience out in the working world, they are gaining the necessary skills to succeed. Ultimately, Aubree thinks Mountainview is a bubble because as a school it prioritizes raising self-esteem but she suggests this is necessary for them to succeed in the working world. The participants’ comments capture how Mountainview works to provide programming and supports that will help students be successful not just during their educational career but also once they have left the school. From Aubree’s comments it is clear that they face challenges but that they work hard to put the student’s best interests first.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study began with the question: What are the experiences of teachers and administrators at a school in which all students have been institutionally designated with a “disability”? From the data collected it becomes clear that the experiences of Aubree, Rachel, Naomi, Ian and Harry offer complex and multifaceted insights into the community that is Mountainview, the impact of societal perceptions of disability, the influence of language on identity, and the shift in mindset required to deconstruct and eliminate ableism.

In Chapter 4 I presented the findings. In this chapter I interpret and evaluate these findings, as well as place them in conversation with relevant literature. In order to illustrate the multiple connections and conclusions that can be drawn from the data as well as highlight topics for further research, I have organized the discussion into the following categories: Community and Empowered Educators; Changing Perceptions of Disability; Making Room for Specialized Educational Settings; Deconstructing Language; and The Paradox of Working in the System. Together, these categories reveal the source and nature of attitudinal barriers of ableism and the implications for the Canadian education system.

Community and Empowered Educators

Collectively, the participants’ experiences tell the story of a community of teachers united through a desire to help their students develop the skills and attitudes to live a life that is fulfilling, that has purpose, positive relationships, and life where they will be challenged to grow and develop. Ultimately, they care. They care for one another, the school and its programs. What creates and stimulates this level of dedication and commitment is their care for the students of
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Mountainview Collegiate Institute. Educating the students of Mountainview in a way that supports and challenges them is what motivates the staff. The community among staff was constructed and is sustained because of a combination of the unique needs of the students, and the staff’s desire to help these students succeed. Because the students require specialized instruction and because the staff wants to ensure this specialized instruction is provided, the staff looks to each other for support. As the staff worked together to meet the needs of the students they developed relationships with one another and a deeper sense of commitment to the school. This in turn meant the development of more specialized programming which required further team initiatives among the staff and thus fostered the communal environment. Each of the participants argued that success for these students would not be possible without the combined efforts of the staff.

Changing Perceptions of Disability

Mountainview’s reputation is deeply intertwined with societal perceptions of disability. Parents, teachers, students, and administrators who have been involved with the school respect the school for its dedication to empowering the students with the skills and mindset they need for their futures. Mountainview has transformed from the time it was founded to present day. Once a school with the Applied and Academic streams and an additional lower level, it has now become a school for students who are do not succeed in the Applied and Academic streams and need additional learning supports for success. As a school it provides programming that challenges students who require alternative approaches to academic material and a chance at more hands-on learning. Despite the changes in the student body, and the development of school infrastructure that provided the necessary supports for its students, the old reputation still remains.
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From an outsider’s perspective, Mountainview is still a school for the “rough and dumb” students. Outsiders include teachers, parents, students, and educational leaders at the Board level who do not seem to understand the students who attend Mountainview; who are implicated within deficitizing discourses of disability; who may or may not have their own experiences of disability; who may or may not have prior experiences as educators of students with disabilities; and who have not experienced the community of Mountainview. Mountainview is a school where teachers and administrators do not want to work, and is a school that is used as a threat, a disciplinary tool used to evoke fear in students so that they do not misbehave. Mountainview’s reputation as a bad, rough school for individuals who are ‘not so bright’ will continue as long as society continues to believe in the following premises:

- An individual is more valuable and respected within society when they succeed in academics; a person who receives lower grades and requires alternative approaches to academic work is somehow less intelligent, less valued, unable to learn
- Having a disability is a bad thing, because it is not the norm; there is something wrong with disabled individuals
- Having a disability assumes lower intelligence
- Students who are deemed ‘problem issues,’ should be grouped together with students who are not as academically focused and with students with disabilities
- Pursuing a vocational career is not as good as pursuing academic careers; pursuing vocational careers are for those who are not intelligent or who are illiterate

These are powerful messages within our education system. The perceptions of Mountainview align with the argument in the literature that our education system is embedded with, and perpetuates the “ideology of deficit” (Kang, 2009, p. 3; Erevelles, 2005; Gabel 2005). As noted
by Erevelles (2005), the messages that these students are receiving align with the societal perceptions that “associate[d] disability] with inconvenience, nonproductivity, weakness, lack of autonomy, and incapacity” (p. 74). These are messages that students, parents, teachers and educational officials are suggesting when they speak of Mountainview. Mountainview is a vocational school. Mountainview is a school for students with disabilities and Mountainview is a school for students who do not do well in the traditional educational environment. Thus, Mountainview’s reputation is informed by perceptions of disability within our society because it is defined by the perceptions of the students who attend the school. As Hehir (2002) explained, ableism teaches that it is “better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign…and hang out with nondisabled kids as opposed to other disabled kids” (p. 3). This school is filled with individuals with disabilities. Thus, for those who do not understand the school, who do not look past labels to see the people, this school is something you stay away from.

Making Room for Specialized Educational Settings

Mountainview is a specialized school because it is a vocational school, because of the students it caters to, because of the unique programming this results in and the teachers that this school attracts. The Toronto District School Board allows for alternative schools that support the learning needs, talents and interests of different kinds of students. Mountainview is similar to two alternative schools within TDSB: the Triangle Program and the University of Toronto Schools. The Triangle Program is a school that offers students “support and a community of gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight and transgender peers” ("About Us," 2014) as they complete their high school education. The Triangle Program offers curriculum that validates their experience, and that provides an environment free from the violence and rejection they have experienced because of inaccurate societal perceptions of sexual orientation. It is in many ways a safe haven for these
students from the negative perceptions associated with their identity. Mountainview is similar to The Triangle Program in that it is an educational space offering refuge for its students from negative perceptions of disability. The students are learning with students like them. They are not marginalized or different from the rest of the students in the class. They are taught to cast aside the negative perceptions they may have internalized, to see such messages as societal beliefs rather than something that is inherently wrong with them. Thus, like the Triangle Program, Mountainview is a school that is conscious of the flaws in the system, that serves to protect its students, and empower them with a new sense of self that will hopefully leave them better able to handle the perceptions of their abilities they will face once they leave.

The University of Toronto Schools is a school for students who are succeed in a traditional academic environment or culture. In a regular high school classroom there is a spectrum of students. There are the one or two students who learn at a much faster pace and who are excel in this traditional learning environment. The University of Toronto Schools (UTS) offers a specialized environment, a school that teaches to students who excel in the traditional environment. At UTS, these students are in a community of learners who require the same type of educational environment, and thus in a community that challenges them in a way a regular classroom may not have been able to.

Like UTS, Mountainview is a school that offers a specialized environment, a school that teaches to the needs of the students who learn at a different pace, and who may have otherwise struggled to succeed in a more traditional school environment. Mountainview, because it is a unique teaching environment, attracts a certain type of educator: an educator who believes there is more than one source of intelligence, who believes that everyone can learn and be challenged, and who believes that everyone has strengths to offer. Many of the teachers who work at
Mountainview are technical teachers. Technical teachers are educators who have professional experience in the vocational sector. Thus, they are the staff that teaches the vocational, trades-based programs they were once a part of and thus find value in. Thus, like UTS, Mountainview is a community that challenges the students in a way that the regular classroom cannot. Mountainview does not want its students to be held back by low expectations. The participants witness the exclusionary attitudes spoken of in the literature, that ableism teaches that students with disabilities “should not be challenged” (Hehir, 2002, p. 4) because they are not as capable, as able, as students without disabilities. The staff echo Hehir’s (2002) assertion that “the most damaging ableist assumption is the belief that disabled people are incapable” (p. 27). The teachers of Mountainview work to challenge their students in a way that aligns with their abilities.

My intention is not to argue for or against segregated schools. I do not want this research study to be interpreted as a reason for encouraging students with disabilities to attend vocational schools, nor a suggestion that all students who require more support in learning should be encouraged to pursue a vocation. I do not want to perpetuate the economic impact that of the deficit model noted by Erevelles (2005) in that individuals with disabilities “have either been completely excluded from participating in economic activity or are located at the lowest rungs of the social division of labor” (p. 74). What I am arguing is that this particular school is doing something right. It offers hope to these students. This particular school is supporting and educating its students through a mindset, pedagogical approach and framework for success that works. All five of my participants emphasized that the services, and mentality that this school has to offer is necessary for its students and cannot be found elsewhere at this point in time. They emphasize that these students would be lost and looked over in a regular school. Their comments
suggest that while our education system should not have to separate students based on their learning needs, that they should be supported no matter where they go, this is not the current state of educational system. This school is necessary in order for these students to experience success in education. However, four of the five participants shared concerns that this school’s future is at risk. Vocational schools are being closed, added on to regular schools. It is unclear what will happen to Mountainview, whether it will stay open or eventually be closed. This research study argues that further attention needs to be given to this school. Further attention should also be given to schools like Mountainview, how schools like this are structured in other contexts. Further research needs to occur on the supports, the services, but most importantly the mindset of the teachers of Mountainview.

**Deconstructing Language**

The language of disability disables the researcher who studies disability. While I was writing this major research project, I became very conscious of the language I was using to discuss disability, the school, the student body, and the staff’s perceptions, as well as my own personal history. Every time we speak or write about disability we are making choices, choices of how we choose to situate disability in relation to the individual or group under discussion. I had to decide between referring to myself as a disabled individual or an individual with a disability. I had to decide whether or not refer to the students of Mountainview as students with disabilities or disabled students. I do not like either option. The former forces me to separate students’ identities from the experience; the latter forces me to define students’ identities by the difference. However, if I referred to the students as different students, or as students with difference, the experience I am trying to communicate is unclear. Yes, they are different, but in
what way? How do we define and refer to this difference? Using the word ‘experience’ in and of itself is problematic because disability is not just an experience, it is an identity, a state of being. However, we have no other name for this difference, no other words to construct this identity. Thus, I had to use the language of disability, a language that has been constructed through the eyes of the medical/clinical model that posits disability as “represent[ative] of innate individual deficits” (Gabel, 2005, p. 2), as something to be fixed, an illness that needs to be cured.

To draw attention to this issue of language, I was strategic in when I used the word disability as a state of being and when I used it to refer to a mindset. For instance, I spoke of a disabling society, a disabling experience, and disabling attitudes as means to emphasize disability as a mindset while I referred to students with disabilities and disabled students to suggest to a state of difference. Thus I tried to draw attention to how the word ‘disability’ is in one context, a name we have given to define a unique state of being, and in another context, a name we need to give to societal perceptions of this difference. That is in part why I titled this paper, ‘Taking the Dis out of Disability.’ One interpretation of the title refers to the act of removing the putdown, or negative connotations associated with this identity marker, messages of lacking intelligence and value. The second inference in the title refers to removing the first three letters of the word ‘disability.’ It is a request for society to recognize the power of language, and to be conscious of how we are constructing this identity as a limitation of abilities. It is important to note that I do not want the difference to be ignored altogether. The objective of this research was not to erase the difference of experience that is disability, but rather to remove the negative connotations and perceptions of this difference.

Understanding how to construct and discuss disability was a point of contention for all of my participants. They all tried to articulate the distinction Anderson (2006) refers to, that
“difference and defect are not synonymous” (p. 371). My participants believed that their students are perceived inaccurately. They all believed that their students were different, that they had a part about them that is this difference we call disability. However, the participants did not know how to define disability without the differences being perceived as undesirable. In other words, they did not want to associate the word disability with their students due to negative connotations but did not want to ignore the difference altogether. Furthermore, they each to varying degrees, grappled with distinguishing the struggles their students faced because of societal barriers from the challenges their students faced regardless of societal barriers. In other words, they recognized that the students were different but they also recognized that those differences in ability often had a large impact on their lives because of society is constructed and perceives difference. All of their responses used language that enforced the medical model of disability and that questioned and countered the medical model. This is reflective of their experience as educators working in a system dictated by the medical model, and speaks to their experience as educators who are witnesses to the inaccuracies of this language in defining the abilities of their students.

Of primary to concern to each of the participants was ensuring that the label of disability did not equate inability, a lack of intelligence or indicate an individual of lesser value to society. They worked to create classrooms that position students to be successful rather than viewed as incapable and unable to be successful. For as the literature and these participants suggest, when a student is treated as incapable and does not succeed, their lack of success “confirms [the] initial perception and reifies [the] student as disabled” (Kang, 2009, p. 3). The staff believed their students all had abilities and they wanted every one of their students to be valued. To them, it did not matter how academically minded the individual was or how much support the student required. Whether or not the student after graduating worked in a grocery store, attended college,
or received assisted living did not matter. All were to be challenged to grow and learn, and have their lives, their existence, valued and appreciated by others. These students and our education system need what this school has to offer.

**The Paradox of Working in the System**

Mountainview presents us with a paradox. Mountainview is a school defined by disability; the school exists because its students are labeled as disabled. How do you teach students to not define themselves based on societal perceptions of disability in a school that is based on the very societal perceptions that confine them? How do you teach a student to not see their disability as what defines them, when the reason they are at the school is because they have been defined by their disability?

The staff spoke of the school as a refuge in many ways for their students. Mountainview is their safe haven. It is the place where they will be taught they can learn, where they are free from the limiting perceptions of society. Where they will not be misunderstood. Where they will be accepted. But they are not free from the influence of ableism inside or outside of the building.

Mountainview is part of an education system that uses the deficit model to understand learning differences. The staff uses the very system of language they do not agree with. Using the deficit/medical model of language, they ‘diagnose’ and ‘identify’ what elements set their students apart from a ‘normal’ student and then create programs that try to ensure their students can best be supported. These are the tools they have available to them to support their students, though they are inscribed within the language of the deficit model.

The staff of Mountainview is also faced with the difficult task of teaching students to embrace who they are, and preparing students to be ready for the society they live in. Naomi should not have to teach her students to stop their repetitive behaviours. She should not have to
videotape a student in order to teach them to conform to a way of being in the world that is deemed ‘normal’. These students should not fear that what is natural to them will be rejected by society. Naomi should have the freedom to say, “Embrace who you are. Your bodily experience is equally accepted and valued.” But this is not our reality. What is so harmful about a repetitive behaviour? Repetitive behaviours make people uncomfortable because they are not considered “normal”. Society does not accept individuals who do not fit the norm, who do not act like norm. Thus, in order for Naomi to do what she can to help them be embraced by society, to be given the chance at something as basic as a job interview, she must equip them with the knowledge of how to change themselves to pretend to be normal. She may not want to have to teach them this, but in order for her to help her students live and function in the society we currently live in, she must. That is the reality they contend with.

Thus, while the participants were all adamant that their students were not to be viewed as less capable or as having something wrong with them, they had to teach students how to survive in a deficit-modeled society. Thus these teachers work on multiple fronts simultaneously, work in multiple frames of understanding simultaneously. They use the language of deficit model of education to understand their students and determine/provide the supports necessary for their education; they are critical of the society and the educational world’s perceptions of students with disabilities and the language used, the negative connotations of difference; they teach their students to see past the negative perceptions they have been taught about themselves; and they teach their students to learn the skills and behaviours that will allow them to act normal in order to have the best life possible. This is a lot of conflicting objectives to juggle. They work in, through, with and against the system all at once.
Implications and Recommendations

As educators we need to become conscious of the language we are using and continue having conversations of how to use language to respect the experience of disability. Educators need to understand the words they use when referring to the identity marker of disability. Currently, we do not have a solution to the issue of language. We do have the ability to be conscious of the systems that construct the words we use; the power those words are imbued with; the messages they implicitly suggest; and ultimately the impact the words have on our construction of identity and the value and worth of an individual. For example, the disability services I was registered with during my undergraduate degree was called the AccessAbility Resource Centre. The department purposely italicized the word ability to draw attention to how the accommodations and modifications they provided students with were in an effort to draw out the potential within an individual. Thus, teachers, administrators, policy-makers, and pre-service teachers need to become familiar with the dialogue among disability and critical disability theorists as well as learn the origins of the deficit-model currently employed in the education system. Without understanding the systems they work within and the barriers they create, educators will only continue to perpetuate the issues rather than foster conversations of how to change the system to ensure access to education for all students. Through dialogue we will be able to uncover the barriers that our students face and seek to develop an education system that works to uncover and embrace the strengths in difference.

The stakes are high. Ableism impacts the life chances of students. It impacts how they perceive themselves and their worth as individuals. Ableism impacts their access to education that challenges them and helps them to discover their potential. The number of students who experience disability is increasing in Canada. As stated earlier, in 2011, Human Resources and
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Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) reported that there are close to 100,000 students experiencing disability in secondary schools and an estimated 200,000 entering the secondary system in the near future. The education system needs to address the system barriers of ableism in order for these students to be challenged, and taught that they are considered valued contributors of our society. While our educational system is in the process of deconstructing and eliminating ableism, educational spaces such as Mountainview Collegiate Institute need to be consulted and researched further, for despite the paradox it faces, Mountainview is a school where teachers are fighting ableist barriers and have adopted the mandate articulated in the Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (2009) of “ensur[ing] that all students have the opportunities they need to fulfill their potential” (p. 5). Mountainview aligns with the goal of the Strategy to “eliminate the biases…[and] barriers…that limit students’ prospects for learning, growing, and fully contributing to society,” particularly for students with disabilities (p. 11). We can learn from the phenomenon that is Mountainview Collegiate Institute.

Conclusion

During this research study, I asked my participants to wrestle with and deconstruct their experiences of working at Mountainview Collegiate Institute. I am grateful to Aubree, Naomi, Ian, Harry, and Rachel for sharing their lived experiences of Mountainview and allowing me to deconstruct and analyze their lived experiences. Through the participants I have learned that there is still much that needs to shift in how we perceive and educate students with disabilities. The mindset and tools to create such a reality are still being discovered. While there is still much to be done, I find inspiration and hope in the participants’ stories for they provide a peak, a flavour, an essence of what is possible when we educate to “release the power” within our students and “invite them to engage their rare and valuable abilities with the community”
(Mullins, 2009). As Aimee Mullins (2009) explained, to educate is to educe, “to bring forth what is within, to bring out potential.” As educators, that is our mandate.
REFERENCES


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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: _______________

Dear ___________________,

I am a graduate student at the OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying and researching the experiences of teachers and administrators at a school in which all students have been institutionally designated with a “disability”. I believe that your insight would be an important contribution to my research.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Patrick Finnessy (pk.finnessy@utoronto.ca). My research supervisor is Dr. Rob Simon (rob.simon@utoronto.ca). The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. The interview process will take 45 - 60 minutes and be recorded using a handheld audio recording device. There is potential for a follow-up interview that will take 15 – 30 minutes but it is not required. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will notify you if any written reports, presentations or conferences occur beyond my final paper and informal presentations. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project. If you agree to the conditions above, please sign the attached consent form. The second copy is for your records. Please do not hesitate to contact me and/or my supervisor if you have any further questions or concerns. Thank you very much for your help.

Sincerely,
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Laura E. Walkling and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ____________________________
Name (printed): _______________________
Date: _______________________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about your background? How did you come into teaching?
2. Tell me a bit about how you came to be at Mountainview.
3. What is it like, working at Mountainview?
4. What are the relationships like among the staff? Do you feel like there is a sense of community?
5. I’ve heard about this thing called the Flight awards. Can you tell me about that?
6. What supports do you have?
7. What value do you see in Mountainview as a school for these students?
8. What do you hope for these students after Mountainview?
9. Do you hear from students who have left? What have their experiences been? Why do you think they keep that connection with Mountainview?
10. How do you define disability?
11. How has Mountainview impacted you? What do you think the impact is of working here on teachers?
12. What is it about Mountainview that drives you to be here? Do you feel fulfilled working here?
13. What are your hopes for Mountainview?
14. What’s Mountainview’s reputation like? How would you like it to be perceived?
15. Anything you want to add that we haven’t talked about yet or topics you want to return to/expand on?