

# Exploring the lives of Dis/abled BIPOC

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## Background

We aimed to explore the voices of Dis/abled BIPOC [Black, Indigenous or People of Color] to understand their experiences, focusing on the inequalities and their intersectionality. Dis/abled BIPOC face many everyday challenges; however, the fundamental foundation of one’s life is education, and many are not provided with appropriate resources or supports, hindering their long-term development and ability to thrive. Within North America, oppression and systematic racism are experienced by BIPOC in several ways, including macro and micro insults. Experiences of racism and insults can trigger responses of anxiety and fear, which are associated with chronically elevated stress hormone levels (e.g., cortisol and epinephrine), like levels documented among those diagnosed with mental health disorders (Smith et al., 2022). Intersectionality poses an even greater risk for dis/abled BIPOC individuals who experience racism and ableism, creating multiple barriers and challenges and increasing mental health issues. Iqtadar et al. (2020) argue that there is evidence to support the notion that the current system, entrenched with systemic racism and ableism, uses labeling of dis/ability to constraint identities of intersectionality, therefore further marginalizing students (p. 3). We aim to understand if labeling of different intersections of dis/abled BIPOC identity impacts their experiences.

## Methods

We interviewed 4 participants in this study that identify as dis/abled BIPOC attending Humber College above the age of 19. The inclusion criteria for this study were individuals who identify as BIPOC. The conducted research was completed through qualitative methods as we were collecting data based on experience that cannot be accurately captured by quantitative statistical analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Our study has utilized semi-structured interviews to capture the lived experiences of dis/abled BIPO. Our research participants are from a marginalized community; therefore, we took special care adhering to the principles of the TCPS to ensure they did not experience harm or feel alienated by our study. To minimize harm, we ensured that questions were non-invasive and informed participants of their rights during the consent process (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018).

## Key Findings

The significant findings in our study was discrimination experienced by dis/abled BIPOC. Our study findings indicate discrimination was experienced predominately within educational settings where educators misunderstood and penalized coping mechanisms and dis/ability as behaviors creating hostile learning environments lacking equitable support or resources. Within peer settings, discrimination and exclusion from regular classroom streams, peers, or lack of resources created conditions for bullying and isolation for dis/abled BIPOC. This study also highlighted the discrimination experienced by dis/abled BIPOC based on their identity as BIPOC, indicating racism and citizenship by virtue of immigration increased barriers and isolation from resources. Another significant finding in our study was awareness and ability to access support of dis/abled BIPOC students. Participant A described their perceptions of access as a dis/abled BIPOC student as “I haven’t heard of any. There are resources for people of color and not for ADHD or disabilities. The most they have is the wheelchair accessible in the front.” Our study findings indicated that families and communities played a pivotal role in individuals' acknowledgment and understanding of dis/ability and perceptions of access needs, as some cultures considered dis/ability to be taboo. Additionally, our findings illustrate perceptions of service gaps due to universal medical models of dis/ability centered around Eurocentric value systems that conflicted with dis/abled BIPOC identities, culture, and understandings of dis/ability.

## Discussion

The data collected from interviewees displays the gap in the classroom setting and ignorance towards acknowledging that support was evident. While doing this research study on the lived experiences of dis/abled BIPOC students what we have come to notice is the limitations in which we as researchers experienced throughout this process. There was a lack of cultural diversity amongst the participants who took part in this study and were also limited to one gender amongst all participants. Throughout this process we have come to understand that if we had asked certain questions regarding cultural upbringing and/or religious beliefs and how these topics may have impacted their lives as a dis/abled BIPOC student it would add valuable information to our research. The services for dis/abled BIPOC might be available, delivery of services does not always result in accessible or equitable environments (Saia et al., 2021). The colonization of dis/ability services presents as an access barrier specific to dis/abled BIPOC as services are not inclusive and are steeped in Eurocentric values. These services generally focus on a “one size fits all” approach and lack the integration of cultural competence and intersectionality within services and programming leaving many to abstain from the services (Puszka et al., 2022).

## Implications for Policy & Practice

- There is a need to advocate for more educational resources for students, a disability justice framework to structure classrooms and bringing awareness to racial systemic disparities.
- Institutions and Governmental bodies will need to demonstrate strength- based methods in relation to practice which allows to reframe models of dis/ability in racism, ableism and reframe them to social models of dis/ability focused on the individuals’ capabilities and atmosphere.

## References

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