

The cream of the crop has gone sour

Ableism at school and during internships

When we ask teachers and heads of programs that provide internships why they require us to put in so much time and energy, we most often hear that it's because the jobs that might follow ask nothing less than the cream of the crop. We hear the same kinds of arguments used to justify that those programs also be full time.

As insolently elitist as those assertions are, they are but the tip of the meritocratic iceberg that reigns over both internships and school work. Who is this "cream of the crop" that is so praised? As expected, they are young and childless, financially supported by relatives – which allows them to dedicate a majority of their time to studying without also holding down a job, – and also mostly white. Finally, they are also neurotypical, healthy and have a fully functional life. So, what about the success rates of all those that do not conform to those stringent criteria? This meritocracy drowns itself in an ableism where no one has the same chance of obtaining a diploma, or rather, not at the same cost.

What is ableism?

Ableism is a social system that excludes people with differing bodies or ways of functioning[\[1\]](#). Within this perspective, people without a disability, called able-bodied (or neurotypical), are considered "normal", which means that it is up to disabled people to adapt to the constraints of society. Within this frame, being disabled is either viewed as a tragedy that leads to an unsatisfying life (one that might even be considered not worth living), or as a challenge that one has to overcome by themselves.

Ableism, capitalism, and production

The ableist argumentations we find in schools, at internships or in workspaces are intrinsically linked to the expectations of productivity imposed by the capitalist system. Indeed, under capitalism, the worth of an individual is determined by their ability to produce. People living with a disability must also submit to these requirements if they want to make a place for themselves in both the academic and professional worlds. They have to continuously adapt to obstacles they encounter on a daily basis: for many, the mental or physical toll makes it impossible to carry on. The people that do persist have to bear a hidden burden to make themselves appealing on the job market, in order to make their labour usable. This invisible burden may consist of following treatments, taking medications that often have side effects, and dedicating all of their remaining personal time to resting so that they can function during paid or unpaid work hours.

And despite all these efforts, many will never be able conform to the expectations of their employers. Think, amongst others, about all those who will spend their lives doing unpaid or underpaid integration internships, because of some mental health or intellectual deficiency for example, without ever being able to fully integrate the workforce. In this case, we can truly see that ableism is used to justify the exploitation of people living with a disability, under the pretext that they can not meet the productivity standards set for them.

Being paid or not is not the only determining factor of those standards of productivity. Indeed, the entirety of student work, though unpaid, is subject to the same expectations that weigh on the entirety of the job market in terms of productivity. Certainly, the workload and the deadlines at school often don't pair well with situations of disability. If there are certain accommodations available, receiving them is a lengthy process and the burden of proof is often put onto the person with the disability.

Recognition in all environments (schools, internships, work)

The process of gaining recognition of a disability is exhausting and complex. And, unfortunately, in a majority of cases, the results are unjust or at least insufficient. The first step is to always obtain a diagnosis from a recognised professional. This means a battery of tests by people who are certified, who will judge of the gravity of the challenges faced and whether or not a certified report is warranted. Quebec's healthcare system is headache inducing ; it is slow and complex, which prevents a lot of people from obtaining a diagnosis. For students, the process is very difficult both mentally and physically, and forces them to include a multitude of meetings into their already heavy workload. At no point in this process is the student's judgment with regards to their own limitations and needs taken into account. If the problem is considered non-handicapping, their chances of receiving support disappear. Many find themselves in a position where it is no longer possible for them to continue studying, let alone work. What becomes of them?

Mental and physical disabilities are not like a terrible cold that can go away after a couple of days of sleep, four tylenols and a lot of water: they are permanent and handicapping. When we refuse to recognize this and to ensure the conditions required to remedy to it, we promote an ableist system directed by a capitalist hegemony that marginalizes these individuals.

And even when we offer certain arrangements, they are often times insufficient. At school, we authorize students having obtained a diagnosis to keep their status as full time students while diminishing their academic workload, while also establishing an intervention plan during exam periods as well as helping them with note-taking in class. On the surface, everything seems fine when this kind of support is offered. However, it is quite the contrary. Even if the student has access to the benefits offered to full-time students, such as

loans and bursaries as well as student discounts, the academic institution itself does not consider them to be full time students, which robs them of certain possibilities for studying, since many programs are not accessible to those wishing to complete their studies part time. Once again, we are subjected to elitist “cream of the crop” discourse. So it won’t be you, student with bodily or functional differences, because everybody knows you wouldn’t be capable of producing enough or accomplishing the required tasks, that you will cost more to society because of the days off you will need because of your disability, and especially that you do not have a place in certain fields, because you aren’t part of the cream. By reducing the amount of courses you take per semester, we prolong your academic journey over many more semesters, and we extend the delay before you arrive on the labour market, which creates further expenses. Loans and bursaries are not gifts; on top of being hardly accessible, debts accumulate at an exponential rate.

I am a young student with an anxiety disorder and a panic disorder. I cannot take a full course load, which lengthens my academic path. Currently, due to loans and bursaries, I am over \$13 000 in debt. My situation isn’t great, I have a college diploma in social sciences as well as a single university semester as an independent student.

The arduously acquired accommodations at school are not systematically applied to internship settings. These are, in fact, independent of schools. Internships happen in workplaces where students must follow a plan that cannot be modified with regards to courses that must be taken simultaneously and minimum required hours of internship work during the same semester, for example. Therefore, the choice of training courses are once again limited for those with disabilities because of the lack of recognition and flexibility within internship programs and settings.

Ultimately, once they arrive on the labour market, it is much more difficult to find a job with a flexible schedule in their desired field. Access to work spaces are another big issue for individuals with a physical disability. The weight is once again on the shoulders of people with functional differences who must endlessly explain their health conditions (when they are not apparent). Often times, they will be told that someone more apt will do the job, and that unfortunately they do not meet the requirements of the position. This lack of openness and recognition perpetuates the isolation of people with functional differences and prevents them from fully integrating into the workforce.

Why should they be recognized as workers?

Just like the labour market, it is essential that internships settings should be adapted to the diverse realities of students. To do this, internships should have full legal recognition as work so that interns could benefit from the same protections that salaried workers have when they have disabilities. The Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms stipulates that an employer has the responsibility to accommodate the working conditions of a disabled employee, barring “undue hardship”[\[2\]](#). However, it is important to mention that the notion of “disability” is not defined in the Charter. In view of this, the concept is subject to interpretation[\[3\]](#). The accommodations that can be offered to an employee include gradual returns to work, assignment to a new position, leave in case of medical appointments, etc. In theory, the employer has the obligation to analyse their employee’s situation under penalty of being sentenced to pay damages and accommodate the disabled person.

Insomuch as it seems necessary that internships should fully be considered as work, and that the legislation should treat it as such, the workplace is a space that also has many gray areas with regards to worker protection. For example, the Labour norms, equity, health and safety commission (Commission

des normes, de l'équité, de la santé et de la sécurité du travail or CNESST) does not specifically address ableism or discrimination based on a disability. The capitalist model largely participates in making the labour market a place of inequality: it contributes to the exploitation of a large number of workers, to the revenue gap between the rich and the poor, and to the fact that pay equity has not yet been attained. That is why we must reflect on a conception of work that is more inclusive and equitable, where invisible work is recognized.

As for the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms, it remains that filing a complaint is a long and tedious process that is strictly individual. We once again put the weight of fighting for rights on the shoulders of those who are disabled. For many, it is a process which is too difficult to handle when their daily lives are already full of obstacles that they need to overcome in order to survive. In this way, they find themselves without real control over their lives.

In the end, adapting internship settings to the situations of interns with functional limitations or mental health disorders begins with a recognition of their efforts as work and a recognition of the invisible labour they carry out on a daily basis in order to render their labour available to their fields.

Putting an end to competition

We are aware that the Labour Code does not entirely protect disabled workers. Indeed, undue hardships are often brought up as a reason to exclude people with disabilities from the labour market. Nevertheless, we consider these protections to represent an interesting avenue to fight for recognition of disabled students' rights.

Ableism, from school to internships, is clearly part of a dynamic by which we are expected to perform just as well with

lesser means. Does a failing grade determine incompatibility with a given field? Or is it rather unrealistic to impose such high requirements on those who start way behind the starting line with an extra weight on their shoulders? In a society in which work is highly valued, can we put an end to ableist discrimination towards workers (students, interns and professionals alike)? If we recognize that a desirable variety of physicalities and functionalities exists in society, it is essential to adapt schools and the workplace to this diversity in order to break the ableist order of society. No longer should we expect these individuals to put their physical and mental health at risk in order to fulfill requirements which are ever more oriented towards capitalist productivity, we should instead adapt their workplaces to their reality!

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1. Fougeryollas states that a disability is actually a social construct. Indeed, there exists a physical or mental difference, but it is the interaction between the environment and individual factors that create the disability, all of which are in constant mutation. Fougeryollas, Patrick & Roy, Kathia (1996). « Regard sur la notion de rôles sociaux. Réflexion conceptuelle sur les rôles en lien avec la problématique du processus de production du handicap ». Service social, 45(3), <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ss/1996-v45-n3-ss3523/706736ar.pdf>↵

2. Leduc, D. (2005). L'obligation d'accommodement en milieu de travail, [En ligne], http://www.portailrh.org/votre_emploi/fiche_lapresse.aspx?f=24670, (consulté le 27 décembre 2017). ↩
3. "Undue hardships" include, for example, the costs of accomodation. These costs can be covered by the collective bargaining agreements negotiated by unions. ↩