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Do We Practice What we Preach? Ambivalence Towards Students With Disabilities, as they Struggle to Demonstrate their Capabilities in the Academic and Professional World

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Introduction: Despite legislative regulations, students with disabilities face barriers to participation in higher education. In health professional programs, transitions between campus and practice learning adds extra dimensions on the students to disclose their disability and request accommodations. Academic staff and placement supervisors report challenges balancing their responsibility to facilitate students' individual learning process, and at the same time assessing the students' qualifications and protecting the professional competency standard.

Objectives: The aims were to explore how students with disabilities experienced participating in professional educations, as well as exploring the perspectives of academic staff and placement supervisors supporting students with disabilities.

Method: Within a qualitative design, data was generated through interviews with 14 students with disabilities, focus-group interviews with 13 members of academic staff and 8 placement supervisors. All recruited from a Norwegian context of professional programs within healthcare, social work and teacher education.

Results: Time constraints, lack of support, and unclear competency criterions triggered a reluctance among staff and placement supervisors towards getting involved with students with disabilities. By working hard to fit into the expectations of normal students in academia and to demonstrate capabilities as future professionals, the students with disabilities coped in silence.

Conclusions: I call for an awareness of the complex relational processes going on between the students and their social environments in higher education. It is urgent for the professional communities to discuss how images around disability, ability and professional competency are constructed, and what barriers that may create for students with disabilities doing professional courses.