***Distance Education* Special Issue: “Inclusive Distance Education for Learners with Dis/Abilities”**

Leading up to, and now moving through the COVID-19 Pandemic, educational institutions at all levels were developing a greater awareness of learners with diverse physical, emotional and learning challenges (de Bruin 2019; Sniatecki, et al., 2015; Kocdar & Bozkurt, 2022; Weedon & Riddell 2016). Despite the heightened awareness, educational opportunities for learners with dis/abilities are lagging. For example, while enrollment in institutions of higher education in the U.S. is increasing, degree completion rates for students with dis/abilities has been low (Järkestig Berggren et al. 2016).

Learners that are identified with disabilities are often seen for what they are unable to do without support versus what they *can do* in learning settings. Thus, it is critical to consider shifts in thinking from disability to dis/ability where learners are also acknowledged for their strengths and potential. Currently, these learners are considered at-risk of not receiving the same level of education as their peers, and thus there was a ‘necessity and urgency’ to provide learners with dis/abilities, access to the regular education system (UNESCO 1994, viii). Nations have stated their agreement and desire to provide an inclusive learning environment through their signing of the Salamanca Statement (1994), this was re-affirmed with the signing and rectification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), the Millennium Development Goals (2000), and most recently the UN Sustainable Development Goals (2016). As a result of these global movements, many countries have clarified and amended their respective laws to include access for learner with dis/abilities to educational opportunities at all levels.

The increasing use of distance learning strategies and affordances during the COVID-19 pandemic for all students can be seen as both an affordance and a barrier for learners with dis/abilities. A review of literature from Kinash et al. (2004) found that attending to the needs of students with dis/abilities held strong promise for ensuring online education would be accessible for all students, regardless of disability identity or status. This promising finding has not found its way into the growing use of technology in distance and online learning. Instead, there is a growing concern that access to the distance/online educational setting will solidfy within an ableist framing as it develops into a normative way of learning and away from the discourse of alternative, disruptive methods of learning. This is unfortunate since there is evidence that accessible instruction and inclusive practice lead to achievement for all students (Black et. al., 2014; Burgstahler 2015; Hromalik et al., 2018).

Such insights have important implications as universities and K-12 educational settings have increased their use of online and distance education strategies during the pandemic and will likely continue to do so in the foreseeable future. Since these modalities have the potential to address accessibility barriers and reshape expectations for when and how learning might occur, it is important to review how these strategies impact learners with dis/abilities in its current form (Xie et al., 2021). Clearly, it cannot be expected that students who stand to benefit substantially from inclusive efforts, such as increased accessibility of course materials, will automatically succeed merely because they are learning online or in some type of distance setting (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Layne et al., 2013; Xu & Jaggars, 2014).

The purpose of this special issue of *Distance Education* is to share research and theorize distance/online education practices across higher education and school settings (K-12) that attend to the inclusion of learners with dis/abilities. Accepted manuscripts will represent exemplary scholarship, reflect international perspectives, and embody the spirit of inclusion in the use of terminology, study design, and theoretical framing.

Suggested topics for this issue include:

* Analysis/critique of policies in government/law-making bodies that expand or constrain online and distance learning and their potential to include/exclude learners with dis/abilities.
* Analysis/critique of understanding about how to support learners with dis/abilities across primary, secondary, and tertiary distance education settings in various domains, including but not restricted to academic learning, social-emotional learning and life-long learning.
* Empirical work, including design-based research approaches, documenting attempts at inclusive design and/or instruction in distance education or online settings and the various outcomes of these attempts, including student outcomes. (Note: Please do not send a study of perceptional outcomes without other sources of data).
* Empirical or theoretical work about transition to, and from distance educational spaces as well as between two distance education spaces.
* Theoretical work highlighting the intersectional and evolving notions of dis/ability and its implications for distance education; this can include post-human theories and lenses.
* The preparation of instructors at primary, secondary, or tertiary education to teach online in ways that are inclusive and informed about dis/ability—meaning that instructors learn to teach using perspectives other than traditional behavior and/or cognitive construction of learning and disability

**Timeline**

Submission of 500-word abstract ([maryrice@unm.edu](mailto:maryrice@unm.edu)) May 16, 2022

Notification and invitation of articles May 20, 2022

First draft submitted through Manuscript Central to *Distance Education* July 18, 2022

Revision notifications August 26, 2022

Second draft submitted through Manuscript Central September 26, 2022

Final notifications of acceptance October 10, 2022

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