

# The Case for Disability Justice in Physical Therapy Education and Practice

By Priyanka Bhakta, SPT

In Spring 2021, I was both nervous and excited to begin filling out my application to physical therapy (PT) school. However, I was soon hit with a reverberating pang of disappointment and confusion when I realized I had to classify my minor in Disability Studies as “Other/Not Listed,” and my minor courses as “Special Topics” because the extensive drop-down menus had no options related to this field, despite it being incredibly relevant to PT practice. I couldn’t help but wonder why this focus was lacking in the application:

*If a legitimate and growing academic field that has been developed by and for people with disabilities is not even recognized by the literal gatekeeper of the PT profession, is our profession truly prepared to meaningfully increase inclusion of people with disabilities within its educational and clinical spaces?*

## A New Focus on Advocacy: Disability Justice

This early experience did not deter me from joining the physical therapy profession; rather, it strengthened my desire to advocate for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts related to people with disabilities within PT. However, in order for advocacy to become

commonplace for all providers, I believe that clinicians and PT institutions as a whole must be challenged to truly contemplate ‘disability’ and its intersections with the field of PT.

As a Disability Studies student, I was introduced to Disability Justice, an anti-ableist movement-based ideological framework developed by disabled activists. This framework is built upon 10 core principles:

1. Intersectionality
2. Leadership of those most impacted
3. Anti-capitalist politic
4. Commitment to cross-movement organizing
5. Recognizing wholeness of all individuals
6. Sustainability
7. Cross-disability solidarity
8. Interdependence
9. Collective access
10. Collective liberation.<sup>1</sup>

The principles of leadership of those most impacted and cross-disability solidarity specifically call for prioritizing the insight and leadership of members of various impairment classifications and of all disability groups in any actions to increase disability inclusion and confront ableism—the system of oppression that is the basis for discrimination and prejudice against people with disabilities and people whose bodies or minds diverge from societally constructed norms.<sup>2</sup>

I believe that these specific principles, and this framework overall, offer the best means to challenge our profession to think about disability more critically and to ensure that inclusion efforts related to people with disabilities are truly appropriate, meaningful, and effective.

## Disability Justice and PT

I first began to personally understand the power of applying Disability Justice principles to physical therapy while working in PT research and outpatient clinic settings. I had noticed that ‘disability’ was often understood and referenced by clinicians as being solely related to visible physical impairments. However, through my Disability Studies education, I had learned that many people with disabilities identify with the term ‘disabled’ as a social identity. I also learned that the broad disability community is inclusive of individuals with ‘invisible’ disabilities such as those living with chronic illnesses/pain, cancer patients and survivors, and neurodivergent individuals, among others.

I have found that sharing simple comments in any setting—clinical, academic, or otherwise—can help folks broaden and improve their perspectives of disability and accommodations, such as pointing out that everyone who uses eyeglasses and contacts are

technically visually-impaired and that their glasses and contacts are assistive devices. Illuminating the diversity in disability and the accommodations we have come to naturally provide for some individuals can, in my experience, serve as an opportunity to underscore that as a society we already understand some accommodations as commonplace and that we must extend that same effort to others who are still facing ableism in its various forms. Thus, I believe that by bringing necessary attention within PT to the diversity within ‘disability’ serves to both bring the principle of cross-disability solidarity into DEI efforts and calls on us to take steps toward inclusion of people with all types of impairments and disabilities.

## Disabled Folks in Leadership Roles

Leadership by the most impacted is a key principle of Disability Justice and underscores that, in order for inclusion efforts in PT to be effective and truly meaningful, they must all be led by people with disabilities. This principle necessitates that individuals and professionals with disabilities, including disability advocates and disability justice activists, are called into our professional conversations to serve as leaders in the development and implementation of all DEI efforts across PT education and clinical settings.

### TEACHING PARTNERSHIPS

One meaningful example of how this principle can be integrated into PT education is the University of Toronto’s critical Disability Studies core course for first-year PT students. This course includes equitable teaching partnerships with local disability communities enacted through small-group sessions for students with disability community members who develop, review,

and revise content as well as facilitate disability scenarios grounded in their experiences that the PT students discuss in the sessions.<sup>3</sup>

## **STAFF, FACULTY, AND DESIGNER RECRUITMENT**

Additionally, recruitment of disabled individuals, activists, researchers, and clinicians to PT program staff and faculty would provide opportunities for individuals with disabilities to lead and enrich PT education and research. Furthermore, PT educational and clinic spaces should be prepared with input from disabled universal design consultants and stakeholders such as students, patients, and faculty in order to be maximally accessible and adaptable to the needs of all individuals, including those with sensory sensitivities to touch, sounds, and/or light.

This tenet also calls for expanding accommodation policies for disabled PT students; however, as reflected in an article<sup>4</sup> published last fall in JHR, there are inherent tensions in accommodations for students in PT programs. This is yet another opportunity to call in

disability advocates and disabled students to serve as leaders for the re-evaluation and potential expansion of accommodations in PT programs to ensure equitable and effective educational experiences for PT students with disabilities. By taking steps to center individuals with disabilities at the heart of our profession and educational institutions, patient care will also improve as these individuals may also use their lived experiences to lead efforts to combat ableism within PT institutions and practice.

## **Envisioned Futures**

Ultimately, I believe that Disability Justice is a dynamic and powerful tool that should be adopted by individual clinicians as well as PT education, clinical, and professional institutions. By implementing Disability Justice into PT and prioritizing leadership by disabled folks, we can envision—and bring to fruition—futures for the profession and practice of physical therapy that better understand the diversity within disability, and that are truly more inclusive of people with disabilities.

## *About the Author/s*



**Priyanka Bhakta, SPT** is a second-year Doctor of Physical Therapy student at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. She graduated with the Class of 2021 from UCLA with her Bachelor of Science in Physiological Science and a minor in Disability Studies. She is the chair of the Humanities Committee for the Emory DPT Class of 2025 and her passion about integrating anti-ableism in physical therapy practice is grounded in this statement from “The 10 Principles of Disability Justice” by Sins Invalid: “We honor the longstanding legacies of resilience and resistance which are the inheritance of all of us whose bodies and minds will not conform. Disability justice is a vision and practice of what is yet-to- be ... a movement towards a world in which every body and mind is known as beautiful.” Outside of school, she enjoys spending time with her nieces, listening to music, and trying new restaurants in Atlanta.