DPU
AARHUS UNIVERSITET

THE TACIT DIMENSION OF NAVIGATING HIGHER EDUCATION WITH AFFECTIVE DISORDERS

AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To investigate the significance of the physical environment for students with affective disorders in higher education.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What embodied and embedded strategies do students with affective disorders use to navigate higher education?
2. What role does the body play in the inclusion of students with affective disorders in higher education?
3. What effect does the physical environment have on the inclusion of students with affective disorders?

BACKGROUND

- **Global estimates** indicate that more than 1.3 billion people—16% of the world's population—experience significant disability resulting from the interaction between individuals and, among other factors, their environments (WHO, 2022; 2026).
- **In Denmark**, one in five students (19%) reports having a disability, and more than half of these students (56%) report having a mental disability (EVA, 2023). Current research on students with hidden disabilities in higher education primarily focuses on barriers, disclosure, accommodations, and individual coping. Little is known about how the interaction between the body, perception, emotions, and material learning environments shapes participation and inclusion in higher education.
- **The participants** in this study are higher education students with affective disorders and comorbid conditions (WHO, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

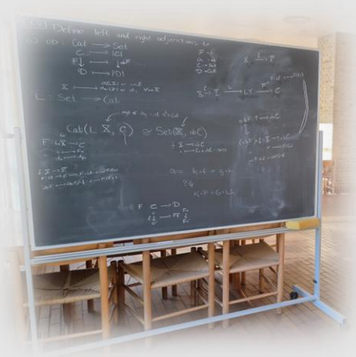
Phenomenological ethnography informed by sensory ethnography

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception (1945)
Yi-Fu Tuan's Space and Place (1977)

METHODS

Walk'and'talk interviews
Participant observation
Photo elicitation,
Audio recordings
Field notes

"[..] I never know how tables are organized, where our teacher will be standing or where I 'll be sitting, it really stresses me. [..]"



"[..] this place is nice! I know where to sit and what to do and what tools to use in this room [..]"

3 KEY EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

1. Students navigate higher education by reducing perceptual complexity through embodied and embedded strategies

Students create routines, reduce uncertainty, and direct attention towards what supports participation and learning.

2. The body is central to inclusion, as students regulate perception and emotions through embodied engagement with their surroundings

Students' tacit knowledge of how to position their bodies, reduce sensory input, repeat familiar bodily movements, and engage with artefacts enables participation in higher education.

3. Constantly changing environments increase cognitive load and hinder participation

Stable places (e.g., lecture halls with a predefined arrangement of chairs and tables) and recognisable artefacts support a sense of belonging, professional identity, and participation.

CONCLUSION

Inclusion in higher education cannot be reduced to physical accessibility or individual support services. It emerges through the interaction between students' embodied tacit knowledge and the physical learning environment. Stable, predictable learning environments and meaningful artefacts support participation, belonging, and professional identity while reducing the regulatory work required to participate. These findings challenge the prevailing pedagogical assumption in Denmark that varied and flexible learning environments are inherently inclusive.

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