

Public space for disabled students in the higher education

Maria Puspitasari

¹ School of Strategic and Global Studies, Universitas Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia

ABSTRAK

Mahasiswa penyandang disabilitas menghadapi praktik diskriminasi dalam ruang gerak di masyarakat, termasuk dalam dunia kampus. Fasilitas yang ada di kampus belum mencerminkan konsep ruang publik sebagai manifestasi dari demokrasi. Pemanfaatan ruang publik merupakan bagian dari upaya menciptakan ruang komunikasi yang inklusif antara semua partisipan tanpa kecuali. Tujuan penelitian adalah mengidentifikasi pengalaman dan pemaknaan para mahasiswa disabilitas terkait dengan ruang publik yang tersedia dalam lingkup kampus. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, dan memanfaatkan wawancara dengan lima orang subjek penelitian, empat adalah mahasiswa, dan satu komisioner penyandang disabilitas. Observasi menjadi metode untuk triangulasi. Penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ruang publik didesain tidak memperhatikan aspek aksesibilitas, kenyamanan dan keamanan bagi mahasiswa penyandang disabilitas. Hal tersebut mengakibatkan kesadaran yang kuat bahwa mereka dimarginalkan dan diabaikan dalam proses kebijakan ruang publik. Penelitian juga menunjukkan pentingnya memperhatikan sejumlah elemen dalam proses membangun ruang publik yang adil dan setara yaitu, mengedepankan prinsip partisipasi yang memperhatikan aspek inklusi social dan tidak ada satupun pihak yang diabaikan dalam proses. Untuk itu diperlukan kerjasama kolaboratif antara pihak kampus dengan mendorong pemerintah membentuk regulasi untuk mengembangkan ruang publik. Pemangku kepentingan yang dilibatkan pertama-tama adalah penyandang disabilitas, bekerjasama dengan pemangku kepentingan kampus serta organisasi masyarakat sipil lainnya.

Kata kunci: ruang publik, penyandang disabilitas, inklusi social, partisipasi, kerentanan

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ABSTRACT

Students with disabilities have been treated discriminative practices in their space of movement in society, including on campus. The facilities available on campus do not yet reflect the concept of public space as a manifestation of democracy. The use of public space is an important part to create an inclusive communication space between all participants without exception. The purpose of this study was to identify the experiences and meanings of disabled students related to the public spaces available on campus. The study used a qualitative approach, and utilized interviews with five research subjects, four of whom were disabled students, and one of Commissioner with disabilities. Observation was the method for triangulation. The study showed that public spaces were designed without considering aspects of accessibility, comfort, and safety for disabled students. This resulted in a strong awareness that they were marginalized and ignored in the public space policy process. The study also showed the importance of take notice to a several elements in the process of building a fair and equal public space, by prioritizing the principle of participation that show interest to aspects of social inclusion and no party is ignored in the process. For this reason, collaborative cooperation is needed between the campus by encouraging the government to form regulations to develop public spaces. The stakeholders involved first are people with disabilities, in collaboration with campus stakeholders and other civil society organizations.

Keywords: public space, disabled students, social inclusion, participation, vulnerability

Maria Puspitasari, Dr.

School of Strategic and Global Studies, University of Indonesia. Jakarta.

Puspitasari11@ui.ac.id

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INTRODUCTION

The difficulties for disabled people to access higher education currently still remain. School participation rates are low, only 56% of disabled people have graduated from elementary school (Badan Pusat Statistik Indonesia, 2018). In 2020, the National Economic Survey (Susenas) recorded that there were 28.05 million people with disabilities (Lingkar Sosial, 2024). This number is equivalent to 10.38 percent of the national population. With 1 in 10 of its population being disabled, Indonesia has the highest prevalence of disability in Southeast Asia according to UNESCAP.

Even though there have been statutory regulations in the US since the mid-1970s, it doesn't mean easy for students to continue their studies to higher education level. They have difficulties continuing their studies to a higher education level since the provision of student assessment services at every stage of their study from admission to the 'high stake' graduation and licensing exams (Konur, 2002). Changes happened over time, there has been some adjustments on assessment for disabled students to ensure that the results of evaluation represents students' achievement in their study (Konur, 2002)

These vulnerabilities show that UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, especially regarding social rights such as social protection, social security, education, and health services, has not been a priority (Meyer, 2012). Recently in Indonesia, there is the discrimination in the undeveloped areas such as remote areas far from Jakarta, and in Jakarta the discrimination and prejudices remain. Disabled people still face bullying in their neighbourhood and their education institution, including in the higher education institution. The discrimination and prejudices still prevail (Madanipour, 2010). This is the fact that happens every day. There are still many challenges that hinder accessibility for people with disabilities.

Most of research aims to explore the difficulties faced by disabled students to gain the opportunities on achieve higher education (Holloway, 2001; Riddell & Weedon, 2014; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010), public policy (Tinklin et al., 2004a, 2004b) and teaching (Konur, 2002). While those previous studies have highlighted the tendency of discrimination and prejudice to underpin discriminatory practices, resulting in unequal communication experiences for people with disabilities, this paper takes a communication science perspective to examine how the needs of disabled students are perceived in public spaces, with particular attention to whether their voices are being heard. By amplifying the voices of those who have been overlooked, this study aims to foster a more humane approach to communication. Beyond simply listening to these voices, it also investigates how public spaces can be reimagined to better meet the needs of disabled students in higher education settings.

The vulnerabilities experienced by disabled students do not occur without cause. Lack of attention and understanding of their limitations and needs is one of the causes of these vulnerabilities. For this reason, it is important to listen to the voices of those who have been marginalized in the development process. Listening unheard voices is the beginning of the

human communication process.

By listening their voices, we also know that one of the most problematic area for the disabled students in higher education is accessibility in public space. Dinç Uyaroğlu mentioned that accessibility is one of manifestation that shown the equal participation to the campus life as well as city life is essential for disabled students as a basic human right (Dinç Uyaroğlu, 2017). His study explored the concepts of accessibility and inclusiveness in focusing on the creation of inclusive campus spatial environment which is seen as a bounded public spatial environment. Furthermore, Dinç Uyaroğlu emphasized the necessity of paying attention to the complex relationship between human and the environment with a focus on physical and socially based design (Dinç Uyaroğlu, 2017).

The issue of public space could be seen from the perspective of human rights. Jørgensen stated that public participation is a right on its own as well as a right that related to a number of other rights (Wahl-Jørgensen, 2014) The right to take part in the conduct of public affairs is stated in Article 21 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights which explain “Everyone has the right to take part in the government...”. Further this article mentioned about the participation is supported by ensuring freedom of expression (Wahl-Jørgensen, 2014), meaning that participation is not only a matter of communication issue on expression but also a matter of access to public space.

As mentioned by Uyaroğlu (Dinç Uyaroğlu, 2017) and Grace Dietz (Dietz, 2023), the issue of public space for disabled students in campus life is arisen. What is public space then? And what is the relevance of public space for disabled students?

Public space according to Stephen Carr in Madanipour (2010) is a concept that has a democratic nature in the sense that it must be usable by all people without exception. Thus, public space requires the principle of social inclusion and equality, where every individual without exception whether they are rich or poor, male or female, and including groups of people with disabilities and the elderly, which means that all citizens can access and utilize public space.

According to Carr (Carmona, 2021) the typology of public space emphasizes the character of its activities, location and formation process. Carr divides the typology of public space not only into streets, parks, green belts, shopping areas, market plazas, and waterfronts but also meant the typology of spontaneous spaces in residential areas, spaces for communities (Carmona, 2021)

Carr also states the need of engagement in the use of public space. Both forms of existence occur as a result of the presence of these participants and the experience of public space can interact in different ways. There is a need of having physical space that be able to provide a comfortable environment to have the social interaction and communication.

Public space according to Carr should be responsive and meaningful (Carmona, 2021).

Responsive in the sense that public space is a space that can be used for various activities and broad democratic interests that have environmental functions. This meant that public space should be used by the general public from various social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. And also could be accessed by people with any physical conditions.

Public space is related to public services on how disabled students could be move easily. As stated by Stephen Carr that public space must be usable by all people without exception (Madanipour, 2010) One of the special characteristics of public space refers to Madanipour (pp. 71-72) is instrumental and/or expressive space. As an instrumental space, all of physical design in campus is used as a tool to achieve goals, to make disabled student move easily and help them to mobile everywhere they want to do. The physical infrastructure provided for them can be seen from its function as an expressive space, where residents can use the area to project and explore identity (Madanipour, 2010).

Refer to a number of public spaces in European cities as a gathering place for youth or migrant subcultures, the public space (Madanipour, 2010). Public space becomes an expressive space of identity that makes youth or migrant subcultures a dignified group. It is important to build public space as a space for expressing identity for disabled students, which makes them not feel objectified and ensure them to feel dignified and respected.

This research then identifies one specific problem, which is to identify and analyze the condition of public space faced by disabled students in higher education area. And how they interpret their experiences into the feeling of being marginalized in their environment. From this point, the research will portray and analyze that into democratization process brought to the campus area through participation.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive method. By utilizing interviews as a method of collecting data that is carried out in depth with four disabled students from various universities in Jakarta. Those four students have been studying in 3 different universities, two private universities and one state universities. They study in three different subjects. Two of them are blind and the other two are deaf. All informants are male. By using purposive sampling as sampling techniques, researcher first goes to the commissioner of Commission for the Protection of the Rights of People, Sunarman Sukamto, and get four informants suitable with the research objectives. Then researcher utilize interviews and observation as data collection methods. Interviews were conducted both directly and via WhatsApp messages regarding the limitations of communication that are possible between researchers and research subjects.

Interviews were conducted with various stakeholders, including Sunarman Sukamto, a commissioner of the Commission for the Protection of the Rights of People. Observations were also carried out at several state and private campuses as part of the data triangulation process. These observations focused on physical infrastructure, such as spatial layouts and public

facilities, and were conducted by walking around the campus accompanied by campus staff. In some instances, the researcher attempted specific activities to experience the mobility challenges described by the informants. Additionally, university-managed websites were reviewed as part of the study.

The research also used secondary data, including relevant laws and reports from national mass media, to build a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by people with disabilities in accessing adequate public spaces. Data collection carried out over a relatively long period of time, spanned from late 2023 to mid-2024, ensuring a thorough examination of the issues.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This part divided into two section, one will discuss the facts, experiences of the four disabled students in campus. The description continues into how they give meaning on their experiences. Part two will discuss from the perspective of democracy and public space.

Accessible and friendly environment

All students and government staff must address the challenges posed by the physical environment in universities. One student shared their experience, stating, *“It is hard to get to the library since we have to climb stairs up to the fifth floor.”* They further explained that with a physical disability affecting their legs, climbing is particularly difficult. Similar challenges were echoed by another student, who described the experience of navigating stairs as *“uncomfortable and unsafe for someone blind like me.”* Other students corroborated these accounts, acknowledging that such obstacles are a daily risk they are forced to endure.

Being disabled meant they have a physical or mental impairment, and that made them difficult to carry out a “normal” day-to-day activity. They need access to appropriate accommodations and support systems to facilitate their learning. This meant that they faced physical barrier.

Physical barriers are varied. The stories of the difficulties to reach out the library as told by two students above, have made us realized that one important aspect needed is the implementation of accessibility such as escalators or elevators.

All of four students who interviewed found difficulties caused by the limited space to move free and comfortable. They have experience that most of the available restrooms are too small, only 1 x 1.2 meter. And in many cases, they found that the restroom is not easy to reach out. Moreover, based on their interview and observation held by researcher, there is a tendency that the space designed in campus focus on functionality defined by normal condition. In this condition, stakeholders on campus rarely think about designing a space that facilitates more comfortable and free movement.

All of students have experiences about the classrooms’ design as small and has many corners that are dangerous and risky. Besides that, there are rarely any spaces that can be used as shared

spaces that are open to the public, without being locked. The classrooms and also the canteen also has full of sharp corners on tables and chairs provided.

Furthermore, those who have visual problems, need Braille materials. Then for the students who have hearing problem need screen reader. And then digital accessibility is important, as it ensures that online learning platforms, course materials, and websites are designed accessible, making them usable by students with visual, hearing, or cognitive disabilities.

From observing some of campus and website designed by them, all of disabled students experiences well confirmed. The facilities such as classroom, canteen, restroom, park, library and others are not designed to meet the needs of disabled students as mentioned by Kordi (2023) as the problem faced by disabled student in schools (Kordi, 2023). And there is also no digital accessibility provided with online learning platforms and course materials. Moreover, the web design is not compatible for the need of learn well and enjoyable.

Based on their experiences, they realized that they were the marginalized people. And as the marginalized people, they feel that they are seen as a burden by the society in the environment, especially in campus. They feel unaccepted and unappreciated when experiencing how the campus environment does not provide public space facilities that take their circumstances into account. Even though they try to maintain their enthusiasm to continue their studies well, the experience of feeling ignored and considered a burden makes them feel limited, making it difficult for them to actively participate in the campus environment.

Public space and disabled students

Public space should be seen in the context of democracy. It is important to show interest to both physical and digital aspects to provide a complete picture of democracy related to the use of public space (Parkinson, 2012). Democratic values embedded in people's lives through social participation mechanisms in various aspects of life are prerequisites for the formation of public spaces that provide benefits for the interests of common welfare. The use of public space requires the support of citizen participation, both through physical and digital spaces. Thus, it appears here that the physical and digital aspects are not separate entities in terms of the use of public space.

As mentioned by Dinç Uyaroğlu that accessibility is part of the equal participation to the campus life and essential for disabled students (Dinç Uyaroğlu, 2017). There is a complex relationship between human and the environment with a focus on physical and socially based design. The concept of design for all products and environment to be able access by people of all abilities dealing into society needed to ensure the communication process takes place in a humane manner without exception (Dinç Uyaroğlu, 2017)

Madanipour have showed the learning from Michialino's research which refers to the case of public space development in several places in Nord-Pasde-Calais, France (2010). The development of public space is designed in such a way using the principle of co-production

that leads to the redefinition of urban development and social identity by involving citizens in a participatory manner (Madanipour, 2010). Participatory means that everyone in the higher education society can be involved in the communication process in formulating what is needed and understanding each other's needs. In its implementation, it was found that although in a number of cases it succeeded in achieving social reform and realizing democracy in the planning and implementation process, there were also disappointing things because they did not meet the expectations of all parties in the community, especially the disabled students.

In this research, we found that there is one thing should be noticed by campus' stakeholders, need to involve the disabled students in designing public space related to their needs. Michiliano's research have showed the failure of build a public space that is fair, equal and comfortable for all caused by ignoring one particular stakeholders (Madanipour, 2010). To design public spaces that accommodate fair and equal needs for disabled students surely is not an easy things to do. To realize the design a communication process needed between all parties in the campus.

A communication process is vital part in realizing the democratization process of the public space. By the involvement of all participants, the capacity to overcome conflicts of perception and the ability to describe compromises that are adjusted to certain situations and contexts, and the capacity of participants to adapt. Furthermore, the evaluation results showed that success was influenced by the existence of strong political will as well as support and commitment (Madanipour, 2010). Michiliano also explained that cases that were considered to have failed, such as in the Bruay-la-Buissière area, occurred due to a lack of political support. This lack of or limited political support indicates a lack of participation from all stakeholders who should also be involved (Madanipour, 2010)

Participation of all stakeholders is not something that just happens, because according to Michiliano there are the need to mobilize the social participation. Mobilizing the participation should be done by increasing the collective awareness from citizens, covering both the management, planning and rebuilding stages, and the complexity of the impact of management, planning and rebuilding decisions using considerations that refer to social and cultural structures, as in the case of Saint Pol sur Mer. The increased collective awareness in Saint Pol sur Mer allows all stakeholders, both politicians, bureaucrats, professional experts, and civilians to formulate their respective positions and contributions (Madanipour, 2010)

Madanipour then explains that it is not easy to find a simple answer on how to uphold democracy in the development of public spaces, because it involves several factors such as the complexity of urban design, development and management processes and the configuration of urban communities in which they are located (Madanipour, 2010)

Madanipour explains how cities are coloured by the actions of groups and organizations that make claims on certain spaces, and even at one point encourage the process of social exclusion and deny inclusivity. These claims can be made by individuals or powerful formal institutions

such as housing developers. Although in some places we can find claims made by individuals or informal groups of people who try to shape space, such as thugs or community organizations. According to Madanipour (2010), these things contribute to the formation of several features of urban space, creating a structure of conditions where other people live and use the city.

The question that arises is: how to build public space? This research have showed the various experiences and how they give meaning on those experiences. The experiences and meanings have given by the disabled students could be a starting point to build a fair and equal public space.

Campus should start to change and to design the compatible environment for them to study. Design of campus should be involving not only universities and architects but also disabled students to make the space inside and all-around campus to be accessible and friendly for them.

Another key question is how to design a campus that is accessible and friendly? For this reason, campuses need to make some of adaptations. First, the building should be accessible to disabled students. Universities should be design spacious passing space for them, provide wheelchairs, the auditory software, large-font presentations, and/or Braille materials for blind and visually impaired students.

To fulfil the need to change, universities, architects and disabled students should work together on a campus design, not only in a physical touch, but also could capture the psychological atmosphere, comfortable, and healthy environment to make all the students could get along together without border.

Campus should open public space, start from awareness that the democracy is a matter of open public space for dialogue and equality for all (Puspitasari, 2023). We could start from making the project together to create the democratic public sphere. In this point we should invite the disabled students to participate in creating accessible and friendly space needed.

The disabled students are the primary actors. They are the primary actors who must be involved in the process of making the campus accessible and friendly to them. They should be brought in together in order to achieve social inclusion for all, including disabled people. We must work together, let all stakeholders participate. As mentioned before, campus should invite all participants including disabled students to listen their opinions about their need for a comfortable space and enable them to improve their abilities.

Hainsworth described the dynamics in the public policy process that view public space at varying levels of interest and commitment (Doorley & Garcia, 2015) The availability of public space will encourage citizens to raise a number of critical issues, such as participation, social inclusion and transparency.

Then the issue of participation that reflects democratic practices is seen in the context of who are the stakeholders involved in the act of designing public space, including the urgency of building public space exclusively at points that are considered strategic? Are all stakeholders involved in providing an assessment of the urgency and strategic value of designing canteen or website or any online platform utilized by them? And who is involved in the policy process up to the budget. When it comes to the issue of who will be involved, we emphasize on to the aspect of social inclusion.

In the process of formulating policies in public spaces, it is important to consider those who carry out the development process, and also those who are targeted in the use of public space, disabled students. According to Parkinson, the availability of space is needed for democratic performance based on participation and social inclusion.(Parkinson, 2012) Public spaces such as parks, sidewalks, classroom, canteen, library, websites and other online learning platform, in their development, are increasingly significant as spaces where we meet with various stakeholders or civitas academic who may not know each other, but are united in public spaces to be open and democratic and therefore inclusive.

Public spaces that are currently shifting into virtual, digital spaces, accessible via gadgets have consequences for the use of information technology as a means of discussing matters related to the public (Parkinson, 2012)

Hoskyns emphasizes one interesting keyword to note in discussing the relationship between democracy and public space both in the context of physical space and spaces that are opened physically or virtually, namely participation (Hoskyns, 2014) Participation is a concept that crosses the boundaries of disciplines in seeing the face of the city. This concept of participation bridges the disciplines of sociology, politics, communication science, architecture to become concrete and real in realizing public policies that are oriented towards the interests of the community. As quoted by Hoskyns from the 2000 Urban White Paper, it is stated that participation is a form of response to the need to overcome urban problems such as slum areas, high unemployment and crime rates, and social exclusion (Hoskyns, 2014)

The remaining question then is whether the space for participation is something utopian or can it really be realized among residents considering the limited awareness of campus' stakeholders to participate? One of communication principle is listening as a basis for building participation, including determining how their needs are met, by paying attention on their problems and the risk they faced in everyday life around the campus.

Working with the disabled students in not enough, we should invite various stakeholders to get involved, including companies, ministries — not only Ministry of Education, but also civil society organizations such as *Nahdlatul Ulama* and *Muhammadiyah* as some of prominent faith-based organizations, and the media to promote the values of respect for disabled groups. Disabled people themselves as part of being democratic is must be involved in the participation

because they understand their needs better and they understand how to formulate the right method for them (Puspitasari, 2023)

And the last point should be realized is the fact that disabilities face discrimination. Sometimes they ignored, abandoned, and marginalized by others in any opportunities. In 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development stating to “leave no one behind,” It is a strategic starting point to highlight the need of full and equal participation of persons with disabilities in all spheres of society and accessible and friendly environment by, for and with persons with disabilities. From seventeen goals defined in SDGs, there are three related goals to disabilities. First is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (SDG #4), as discussed before, especially in universities. Second is to reduce inequality within and among countries (SDG #10), and the way campus involved, will help to build equality for disabilities.

And the last is to strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development. Monkeltaan (2019) emphasizes the importance of cooperation, which should be based on an equal partnership scheme involving all stakeholders. This includes not only funding agencies, non-profits, and other organizations but also companies, which play a vital role in urging governments to incorporate people with disabilities into their development plans (Monkeltaan, 2019). Companies with the obligation of doing corporate social responsibilities could be part of the partnership expected in SDGs.

And last, based on identification of those problems as mentioned above, we should listen the voices of disabled students to identify and promote pathways to increase opportunities for their community participation. Started from doing formative research as a method for identifying their needs and capabilities. From this point, government and any significant stakeholders should work together to make them could fulfilled their need to achieve higher education and equal opportunities to get work.

And all the people in society, especially universities, should create the system to invite and encourage all of students to learn new perspective: listening and not judging and actually finding out what they're dealing with, rather than what you assume they're dealing with. We can use digital eminence to encourage participation and support for disabled people and all of us to get along and live together peacefully and creatively.

From implementing those points mentioned above, social inclusion will be manifested in a real, concrete and sustainable effort for the better world. We promote and encourage the basic understanding of how to respect others, so no one is left behind, encourage participation for all. Then we should ensure everyone has the same opportunities to participate in every aspect of life to the best, together, and be sustainable.

Law Number 26 of 2007 describes that spatial planning needs to take notice to aspects of integration; harmony and balance; sustainability; usefulness and effectiveness; openness;

togetherness and partnership; protection of public interests; legal certainty and justice; and accountability. Based on the law, we see that the planning of public space is actually a part of the responsibility of the state. However, in its implementation above we found several problems.

Based on the Law, we need to encourage government to set regulation and also the Campus. Regulation is a fundamental for ensuring the process will be conduct well. And then government and campus must manage the implementation by creating work units that are responsible for ensuring the process runs well. By implementing all the concept of inclusiveness or “no one left behind”, campus will create the accessible and friendly space and encourage disabilities to be able to continue their study in university. This is in line with the idea of SDGs to reduce inequality and to ensure inclusive education for all.

Disabled students should be the focal point of in this process. The inclusion of disability will be a powerful tool for people with disabilities to use as they raise their concerns with their own governments, and work in partnership together to deliver progress. Participation that involves all stakeholders, including companies, civil society organizations and media can ensure the sustainability of the program. Therefore, universities must continue to prioritize the inclusion, accessibility, as a sustainable supports for disabled students. By doing so, they can contribute to creating a more equal and diverse academic environment.

CONCLUSION

Discussions about disabled students need to take notice on the dimensions of public space by first listening to the experiences and perspectives of those who often marginalized in society. Public space as a foundation of democracy should be seen not only as a physical space, but it is also reflecting a social space that treat all people with equality and fairness.

In the context of higher education, disabled students often find themselves excluded and neglected in the process of defining and designing public spaces. They are compelled to adapt to campus spaces that have been designed without their input, leaving them unable to participate in shaping environments that directly impact their access and inclusion.

Since democracy emphasizes participation, disabled students must be involved in defining and designing public spaces to ensure their inclusion in campus life. For this reason, it is important to involve all stakeholders in collaboration, including the campus community, government, and civil society organizations. The government should establish regulations to support equitable spaces, while civil society can help identify needs and develop inclusive solutions. Such efforts are essential to creating fair and accessible public spaces for disabled students.

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