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Abstract

This study uses data from the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability to examine differences in educational experiences between women and men aged 15 to 34 with a disability. These experiences capture the difficulties that persons with disabilities reported encountering in school, such as limitations on learning, social exclusion and a lack of accommodations. Overall, there were more similarities than differences in educational experiences between women and men, with a few noteworthy exceptions. A greater proportion of women than men did their schooling online or by home study, while a greater proportion of men changed schools or attended a special school or classes because of their condition. A larger proportion of men than women reported that it took longer to achieve their education because of their condition. On accommodations needed to attend school, a larger proportion of men reported a need for assistive devices or services and specialized transportation, but there were no differences for unmet accommodations or other needs between women and men. On social experiences, a larger proportion of men reported that some people avoided them at school.

Key words: students with disabilities; women with disabilities; learning experiences; school accommodations; disability discrimination.

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Introduction

Persons with disabilities tend to have lower levels of educational attainment than persons without disabilities. This difference has been attributed to various factors, such as school absence, academic performance, parental expectations and health-related stigma (Arim and Frenette 2019; Chatzitheochari and Platt 2019; Queirós, Wehby and Halpern 2015; Shandra and Hogan 2009). Among persons aged 25 to 44 years, almost double the proportion of women with disabilities (11%) than women without disabilities (6%) had no certificate, diploma or degree. However, a comparatively larger proportion of men with disabilities (19%) had less education than a high school diploma. About 30% of women with disabilities had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 43% of women without disabilities and 17% of men with disabilities.

The social model of disability focuses on the socially imposed disadvantages that make daily activities and participation difficult for persons with disabilities (Burlock 2017; Grondin 2016). Accordingly, the lower educational attainment of persons with disabilities can be attributed to barriers that decrease their chances for educational success (Kimball et al. 2016). Common examples of these barriers are schools with inaccessible buildings, a lack of specialized transportation, or unavailability of special programs or classes. Persons with disabilities may also require accommodations such as assistive devices, support services or a modified curriculum to enable their academic success. Without these accommodations, students may be compelled to change their preferred course of studies, take longer to achieve their education or discontinue their education. Furthermore, disability stigma may lead to social isolation at school.

The present study expands on previous work by Burlock (2017) by comparing the educational experiences of women and men aged 15 to 34 with disabilities.¹ These experiences capture the difficulties that persons with disabilities reported encountering in school, such as limitations on learning experiences, social exclusion and a lack of accommodations needed to attend school. The present analysis also considers whether severity of disability contributes to potential differences in educational experiences between women and men.

Data source and measures

The study is based on data from the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD), which is a postcensal survey that collected data on Canadians aged 15 years and older with a functional difficulty (e.g., difficulty seeing), mental health-related condition or other condition that had lasted or was expected to last six months or longer (Cloutier, Grondin and Lévesque 2018). The survey covered Canadians residing in households in the 10 provinces and 3 territories, but excluded individuals residing in institutions (e.g., long-term care facilities) and on First Nations reserves. The 2017 CSD collected information on 23,126 individuals aged 15 years and older (an estimated weighted population size of 6,246,640). Over one-half of the survey respondents (55.8%) were women (the variable collected in the CSD was sex). The CSD had an overall response rate of 69.5%.

The presence of disability was identified with the Disability Screening Questions (DSQ), which operationalize disability based on the social model (Cloutier, Grondin and Lévesque 2018). The DSQ is a self-reported survey instrument that defines disability as a functional difficulty or condition that interacts with environmental barriers to limit a person's daily activities. A global severity score was calculated

1. The data from the 2012 and 2017 cycles of the CSD are not comparable because of differences in their sampling frames (see Cloutier, Grondin and Lévesque 2018).

based on the number of different types of disabilities a person reported and the level and frequency of activity limitation associated with each type.²

The CSD asked respondents a wide range of questions about their educational experiences. These questions focused on the impact of a condition on discontinued education, learning experiences related to school completion and course of study, and social experiences at school. There were also questions on school accessibility, i.e., accommodations needed to attend school and whether these accommodations were met.

The analysis focuses on respondents aged 15 to 34 years who attended school at the time of the survey (conducted from March to August 2017) or during the previous five years (between 2012 and 2017) and reported having a disability while attending school. This includes a weighted population size of 424,860 women and 283,990 men with disabilities. This study uses descriptive statistics to compare young women and men with disabilities in terms of educational experiences among persons with (1) any disability, (2) mild or moderate disabilities (“less severe” cases), and (3) severe or very severe disabilities (“more severe” cases). While differences in types of disabilities could also influence sex differences in educational experiences, data and methodological limitations prevented a comparison across different types of disabilities.

Results

Descriptive characteristics

Table 1 describes selected characteristics of the study population. Among the study population, 50% of women and 48% of men were currently in school at the time of the survey in 2017, and a similar proportion (50% of women and 52% of men) had attended school in the previous five years.

Women had significantly higher levels of education than men. About twice as many women (23%) than men (12%) had a bachelor’s degree or higher, and the proportion of women with a college or CEGEP certificate or diploma below a bachelor’s degree (21%) was almost twice as high as the proportion of men with a similar level of education (11%). Conversely, significantly fewer women (4%) than men (7%) had a trade certificate or diploma.³

There were no significant differences between women and men for either the severity of disability or the number of disabilities. About half of women (53%) and men (51%) had a mild disability, while one-fifth of both women and men had a moderate level of disability. About one-quarter of women and under one-third of men had either a severe or very severe disability. Most of the women (58%) and men (55%) had two or more disabilities.

2. See Cloutier, Grondin and Lévesque (2018), Appendix C, for details on the definition of the disability severity indicators.

3. The sex differences presented in this table are not intended to be estimates of the impact of disability on educational attainment, as many other factors may play important roles.

Table 1
Selected characteristics of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 to 34,
currently in school or attended school in the past five years, 2017

	Women	Men
	percent	
School attendance		
Currently in school	50.0	48.4
Attended school in the past five years	50.0	51.6
Highest level of education		
Less than high school	21.1 *	33.7
High school diploma	31.9	36.6
Trade certificate or diploma	3.7 *	6.8
College or CEGEP certificate or diploma ¹	20.7 *	11.2
Bachelor's degree or higher	22.5 *	11.7
Age group		
15 to 24	66.6 *	71.3
25 to 34	33.4 *	28.7
Severity of disability		
Mild	52.5	50.6
Moderate	21.0	20.5
Severe	17.3	17.8
Very severe	9.2	11.1
Number of disabilities		
One	41.7	45.4
Two or three	41.1	37.8
More than three	17.2	16.7

* significantly different from men in the same population at $p < 0.05$

1. Includes postsecondary diploma or certificate below a bachelor's degree.

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Disability, 2017.

Discontinued education

A similar proportion of women and men (29% each) discontinued their education because of their condition (Table 2). About 9% of women and 12% of men with disabilities reported having ever discontinued their education or training because of a lack of assistive devices or support services, but this difference was statistically non-significant.

When considering severity of disability, women and men were generally similar in their experience of discontinued education, with one notable difference. About 5% of women with less severe disabilities discontinued their education because of a lack of assistive devices or support services, which was about half the proportion of men (10%; use with caution). A similar proportion of women (23%) and men (24%) in this severity group discontinued their education because of their condition. As expected, a larger proportion of women and men with more severe disabilities discontinued their education; however, there were no differences by sex.

Overall, the experience of discontinued education was largely similar between men and women, except for those with less severe disabilities, with regard to a lack of assistive devices or support services.

Learning experiences

Of the 12 learning experiences considered, differences by sex were not statistically significant for half of the learning experiences across any of the disability categories—any disability, less severe disability or more severe disability (Table 2). A similar proportion of women (15%) and men (14%) with any disability began school at a later age than most people of the same age because of their condition (Table 2, Column 1). There was a broad similarity between women and men with disabilities in various other learning experiences related to their condition, including having to leave their community for schooling, taking fewer courses or subjects, changing the course of their studies, restricting the choice of their courses or careers and incurring additional school-related expenses.

However, a few differences by sex were observed. A higher proportion of women (27%) than men (20%) with any disability took courses online or by home study because of their condition. This difference appears to be a function of severity group, as about twice the proportion of women (45%) than men (22%) with more severe disabilities took courses online or by home study.

In contrast, a significantly lower proportion of women (26%) than men (32%) with any disability changed schools because of their condition. This difference largely occurred among women and men with less severe disabilities (19% of women vs. 25% of men changed schools). The difference in the proportion of women and men with more severe disabilities who changed schools was statistically non-significant, although the proportion was high for both sexes, as almost half of the women (45%) and men (49%) in this severity group changed schools.

Table 2
Educational experiences of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 to 34, by sex and severity of disability, 2017

	Any disability		Less severe		More severe	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
	percent					
Discontinued education						
Because of a lack of assistive devices or support services	9.4	12.1	5.2 *	10.1 ^E	21.2	16.8
Because of condition	29.1	28.8	22.5	24.0	47.2	40.4
Learning experiences						
Began school later	14.9	14.1	11.3	11.4	24.9	20.5
Online or home study	26.9 *	20.1	20.3	19.3	45.1 *	22.2
Changed schools	25.7 *	31.6	18.8 *	24.5	45.0	49.1
Left community for schooling	16.8	17.1	13.0	14.6	27.5	23.3
Attended special school or classes	17.2 *	32.6	12.1 *	24.2	31.2 *	53.3
Took fewer courses or subjects	40.2	40.8	33.4	33.4	59.0	59.1
Changed course of studies	29.5	30.8	24.2	26.6	44.3	41.3
Choice of courses or careers was influenced	42.7	44.5	36.9	38.2	58.5	60.2
Education was interrupted	31.4	30.1	23.6	27.5	52.8 *	36.5
Went back to school for retraining	17.8	16.2	14.1	16.0	28.0 *	16.7
Incurred additional expenses	19.6	18.8	15.6	16.0	30.8	25.9
Took longer to achieve education	39.6 *	48.0	33.2 *	42.7	57.2	61.0
Social experiences						
Avoided by people	26.7 *	34.3	18.1 *	25.1	50.4	56.8
Felt left out	45.3	44.4	37.4	36.0	66.9	65.2
Was bullied	38.2	40.8	31.1	34.8	58.0	55.8
Any of above	56.1	56.6	48.4	49.2	77.4	75.0
School accessibility						
Needed modified building features	7.8	8.1	5.1 ^E	4.1 ^E	15.5	18.1
Had modified building features	70.2	69.5	60.0 ^E	77.1	79.6	65.3
Needed specialized transportation	3.4 ^{E *}	7.5	1.2 ^E	F	9.5 ^{E *}	19.9
Had specialized transportation	76.8	84.9	92.4	F	71.4 ^E	92.9
Needed assistive devices or services	37.4 *	49.7	29.7 *	41.0	58.6 *	71.0
Had assistive devices or services	96.3	96.9	97.1	95.7	95.1	98.7

^E use with caution

F too unreliable to be published

* significantly different from men in same disability class at $p < 0.05$

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Disability, 2017.

The proportion of women with any disability who attended a special school or special classes at a regular school because of their condition (17%) was also significantly lower than among men (33%). This difference was consistent across severity groups. Among persons with less severe disabilities, about half the proportion of women (12%) attended special schools or classes compared with men (24%). Among persons with more severe disabilities, under one-third of women (31%) and over one-half of men (53%) attended a special school or special classes.

Differences in two learning experiences were apparent only between women and men with more severe disabilities. Over one-half of women (53%) in this severity group reported that their education was interrupted because of their condition, while one-third of men (37%) reported the same experience. Similarly, a significantly higher proportion of women (28%) than men (17%) with more severe disabilities went back to school for retraining.

A significantly lower proportion of women (40%) than men (48%) with any disability reported that it took them longer to achieve their present level of education because of their condition. This difference was confined to persons with less severe disabilities. Among persons with less severe disabilities, 33% of women versus 43% of men reported taking longer to achieve their present level of education, compared with 57% of women and 61% of men with more severe disabilities.

Overall, a few differences in learning experiences were observed between men and women with disabilities. Among persons with any disability, a significantly higher proportion of women than men did their schooling online or by home study, but a significantly lower proportion of women than men changed schools, attended special schools or classes, or took longer to achieve their education.

Social experiences

In general, young women and men with disabilities reported similar social experiences at school. For example, 56% of women and 57% of men with any disability reported having at least one of the three negative social experiences at school, namely, being avoided by some people, feeling left out or being bullied. Notably, fewer women (27%) than men (34%) reported that some people avoided them at school because of their condition. This difference largely reflects the difference between women (18%) and men (25%) among persons with less severe disabilities rather than among those with more severe disabilities. There were no other differences by sex.

School accessibility

In the CSD, there were questions on the need for building modifications (e.g., accessible classrooms, adapted washrooms, ramps, elevators) and specialized transportation to attend school, and the need for assistive devices, support services or modifications to the curriculum to follow courses. These questions were followed with questions on whether these accommodations were available to the respondents who needed them.

About 8% of women and men with any disability reported a need for modified building features, and the majority (70%) reported that these features were available to them.

Significantly fewer women (3%; use with caution) than men (8%) with any disability reported that they needed specialized transportation to attend school. This need was concentrated among persons with more severe disabilities, among whom about 10% (use with caution) of women and 20% of men reported needing specialized transportation to attend school. Among those that required it, about 71% (use with caution) of women and 93% of men with more severe disabilities reported that specialized transportation was available to them.

Across severity categories, women reported a significantly lower need than men for assistive devices, support services or a modified curriculum. Among persons with less severe disabilities, 30% of women and 41% of men reported needing these accommodations. The vast majority of persons in this severity group—97% of women and 96% of men—had these accommodations met. Among persons with more severe disabilities, 59% of women and 71% of men reported needing assistive devices, support services or a modified curriculum, and the majority of women (95%) and men (99%) in this group had these accommodations met.

In sum, a significantly lower proportion of women than men reported a need for specialized transportation or assistive devices or support services to attend school, but there were no other differences by sex in experiences related to school accessibility.

Conclusion

This study provided a comprehensive overview of the educational experiences of women with disabilities, as compared with men with disabilities, using data from the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD). Overall, the findings from the present analysis suggest that there were more similarities than differences in educational experiences between women and men with disabilities. Yet, there were a few noteworthy dissimilarities.

Among persons with more severe disabilities, double the proportion of women (45%) as men (22%) did their courses online or by home study because of their condition.⁴ Whether or not this represents an advantage or disadvantage among women is not clear from the present analysis, because there were no reported differences between men and women with disabilities on their needs or unmet needs for accommodations to attend school or complete courses.

Compared with men, a lower proportion of women with disabilities attended a special school or took special classes. In part, this difference could reflect sex differences in the types of disabilities that are usually considered for special education classes (e.g., learning disabilities, which are more prevalent among men than women) (Oswald et al. 2003). Data limitations and the presence of comorbid conditions among CSD respondents (58% of women and 55% of men had multiple disabilities)⁵ prevented an investigation into how specific disability types may influence differences by sex in special education and other educational experiences. This gap in enrolment could also be attributable to the higher proportion of women who completed their schooling online or by home study.

Consistent with patterns in the general population, women with disabilities reported higher levels of educational attainment than men. Despite this advantage, a higher proportion of women (53%) than men (37%) with more severe disabilities reported that their education was interrupted because of their condition.

For several educational experiences, men with disabilities reported a greater disadvantage than women. Among persons with less severe disabilities, double the proportion of men (10%; use with caution) than women (5%) discontinued their education because of a lack of assistive devices or support services. While men reported a greater need for assistive devices and support services than women (50% vs. 37%), there were no significant differences by sex in the availability of these accommodations at school. Men also reported a comparatively greater need for specialized transportation to attend school. A larger proportion of men than women reported that they needed to change schools and that it took them longer to achieve their present level of education because of their condition.

The findings in this study shed light on differences in educational experiences between women and men with disabilities. Future research is warranted to better understand the factors that may be associated with these differences. More research is also needed to better understand whether these differences vary with type of disability and demographic characteristics. Data limitations prevented a deeper analysis into these issues, and the results presented above are intended to represent overall differences. The results do not rule out the possibility that other factors could contribute to dissimilarities between women and men. Moreover, the CSD questions on educational experiences were asked only of persons who were currently attending or who had attended school in the past five years. Whether there are differences in barriers to school attendance and educational experiences between women and men who were not in school is unknown from these data.

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4. This finding is based on pre-pandemic data. Access to and use of online schooling among persons with disabilities may have changed since the CSD was conducted.
 5. For example, a person with a learning disability may also have a memory disability, and disentangling their independent associations with educational experiences is methodologically complex.

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