

Authentic Inclusion: A Celebration of Exceptional Teachers and Student Identity
A Phenomenological Self-Study

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Abstract: This phenomenological study examines the professional struggles of teachers with disabilities, the influence these teachers have on the identity formation of students with disabilities, as well as their effect on regular education students. When allowed to celebrate their differences, teachers with disabilities cultivate disability pride. Disability culture then flourishes while diversity is honored in an authentic, inclusive school setting.

Key Words: teachers with disabilities, identity formation, authentic inclusion

*Editor's note: this article was anonymously peer reviewed.

*an image of truth
children gravitate toward
what is real, like them*

(entry from the author's reflective journal).

I am a teacher, and I am a person who stutters (PWS). At times I am completely fluent, but at other times, I stutter on almost every word. My stutter is usually situational; phone calls bring it out, as does reading aloud. Since my stuttering is inconsistent, it means that there are people in my life who never know that I stutter (e.g., the neighbor) and there are people in my life who only know me as a person who stutters (e.g., the telephone customer service agent at Wells Fargo).

In my classroom, I stutter on a daily basis and the students know and accept this different way of speaking. In fact, they enjoy trying on stuttering like a dress-up costume; they like to see how stuttering looks on them. Of course, it is not the same as my stutter because they are choosing disfluency and I have less, and at times no, control over it. When students do this they are in no way teasing me. Instead, they are innocently fascinated – and dare I say intrigued – by this unique way of saying words. And believe me, I can spot teasing from a mile away. This may seem incredulous, and it certainly is unbelievable to most school administrators. To be sure, as I stutter through my introductory statements I have heard giggles and faint imitations. However, after this predictable preamble, I quickly begin to unveil my disability. Giving a short history of my childhood experience with stuttering clears the air and helps students empathize. I then demonstrate the types of stuttering and explain that it isn't catching nor does it mean I am nervous, insecure, or crazy (that always gets some laughs). Then I open the floor for questions, of which there are always many, and the education begins. After this introductory lesson, I have never had classroom teasing occur. There may be out-of-class teasing, although in a school this small I would be likely to hear of it quickly. And yet, even if teasing did occur, it would present a wonderful opportunity to empathize with students who have experienced teasing as well. I no

longer fear this form of intolerance; it is simply a sign that students are ready to begin their disability education. However, I have not always felt this way.

When I first began teaching five years ago, my goal was to hide stuttering, or pass as a fluent person. In truth, this “goal” was assigned to me in my teacher education program. During observed lessons, I received a lower grade because my stutter was interpreted as a sign of nervousness or insecurity. Since I wanted a good referral for a future potential job, I worked diligently to hide my stutter at all times. When teaching, I would employ *circumlocution*, which is frequently used by PWS who are trying to pass as fluent. This avoidance strategy involves substituting fluent-prone words for the problematic stutter-prone words. While this technique sounds desirable, it actually promotes fear of certain sounds and words. In addition, circumlocution causes rambling as I mentally scramble to find a fluent replacement word – the only bonus is a broadened vocabulary.

In my efforts to pass, I would also rehearse lessons – to the point of videotaping them – checking for signs of stuttering. When that proved too time consuming, I tried speaking very quickly, so I could basically run my words together and avoid stuttering. Of course, this is not an effective way to teach, and is certainly not preferable for the English Language Learner (ELL) students. Because of these efforts to pass, which resulted in what I think was less effective teaching (albeit less stuttering), I scored well on my later observations. I obtained a good referral, noting I had much better scores on the fluent lessons compared to the lessons in which I stuttered.

I have experience teaching kindergarten through eighth grade students, and in all classes, I stuttered. In all the classes the students were, and continue to be, understanding, kind, and patient. I know this may seem surprising. Perhaps it is the way that I openly discuss my stuttering; perhaps it is my unapologetic demeanor. Ultimately, I think it is the fact that all students feel different in some way, so seeing a teacher who embraces her uniqueness is actually a cathartic process for them, a rush of relief that finally they have a teacher that is not “perfect.”

This being said, while students have proven to be accepting and even celebratory, parents, employers, and administrators still have a long way to come. One interviewer/principal said that her junior high class would “eat me alive.” I have yet to have been eaten alive by students, but adults are another animal. It was more than challenging to complete interviews while stuttering due to the prejudices surrounding the disorder, yet in all my experience I have seen only positives come from it in the classroom. The only negative aspect of my disability is the stress encountered when I phase between my tolerant classroom and intolerant society. If I cannot get hired due to my disability, how will special needs students gain access to a powerful role model, a teacher who embodies diversity? How will regular education students learn to accept disability as a normal part of life? And how will schools prepare all students for the complex, diverse society that awaits them after graduation?

The Context of the Study

In addition to teaching, I am also completing my Master’s of Education in Special Education at the University of Alaska Southeast. This program requires the successful

completion of a phenomenological self-study in which the author explores a phenomenon significant to his or her current teaching situation; this study is the product of that requirement. However, in the course of my research, it became clear that this project was no longer just an assignment. Instead, this study became highly relevant to my personal and professional journey as a teacher who stutters, a teacher with a disability.

For the past six years, I have been a multigrade classroom teacher in rural Alaska. In my present classroom of 11 students, I have four students with special needs ranging from vision-related issues, to learning disabilities in reading and writing, to attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). This means that one third of my students are exceptional; their needs are unique and require adaptations.

My students and I learn together in a Yup'ik Eskimo village in Southwest Alaska. The elders of the village speak Yup'ik, which is the traditional language, but the children primarily speak English. Overall, the Yup'ik language in our village has been dying.

There are 57 students in our kindergarten through 12th grade school. Fifty-five students are Alaska Native and two are of European-American descent. Ninety-six percent of the students in our school (100% of the Alaska Native students) receive Title I free and reduced lunches. The two students who make up the non-Native student body do not receive free and reduced lunch.

This rural village has a population of 230. The median household income is \$16,250 with 40% of people living below the poverty level. The population is 94% Native. The school, the city, local businesses, and commercial fishing outfits employ most of the work force. There are 150 employable people and 59 available jobs. The community housing in the village does not have running water or plumbing; however, work is almost completed on a water system that would provide all Native housing with running water and flush toilets. Half of the teacher housing has tank water systems, but no plumbing (Alaska Department of Commerce, Community, & Economic Development, 2007).

Students with exceptionalities are included in all lessons and activities in my classroom; these children are not removed for isolated instruction. Diverse and distinctive, each child brings his or her special quality to my room. The differences these children bring makes my classroom stronger as a learning community.

Statement of Purpose

One purpose of this phenomenological self-study was to explore my feelings and beliefs about the discrimination and challenges that I experience as a teacher who stutters. Another purpose of this self-study was to describe the effects that an inclusive classroom educator who is herself disabled has on her students.

Research Questions

1. What are my beliefs about parents, administrators, and employers accepting, celebrating, and hiring teachers with disabilities?

2. What are my beliefs about how teachers with disabilities affect the identity, experiences, and attitudes of their students?
3. How do these beliefs guide and inform my classroom practices?

Review of the Literature

Selection Criteria

The essential purpose of the literature review was to locate scholarly articles pertaining to teachers who stutter and/or teachers with disabilities and their effect on students' identity construction. Since few articles addressing this specific question exist, the literature review broadened to include issues surrounding this topic, such as discriminatory practices, identity construction, and the cultivation of disability culture. Ultimately, the 19 articles that were selected met the following criteria: (a) examined the attitudes and beliefs that parents, administrators, and teachers have about hiring teachers with disabilities; and/or (b) described how teachers with disabilities affect the identity, experiences, and attitudes of their students. These articles were published in professional journals related to the field of education between 1997 and 2007.

Search Procedures

I searched four databases that index articles related to the field of education to locate articles related to my research topic. These databases included: (a) Educational Research Information Clearing House (ERIC) (EBSCOhost); (b) Education Abstracts (OLC FirstSearch); (c) Educational Journals (Proquest Journals Collection); and (d) Professional Development Collection (EBSCOhost). I used the following search term combinations to conduct advanced searches of each database: ("teachers with disabilities"); ("stuttering" AND "quality of life"); ("stuttering" AND "role models"); ("hidden disabilities" AND "employers"); ("teachers with special needs"); ("teachers with disabilities" AND "employers"); ("teachers with disabilities" AND "parents"); ("disability culture" AND "identity construction"); and ("stuttering" AND "advocacy").

Emergent Themes from the Review of the Literature

Nineteen articles met the selection criteria and were included in this review of the literature. A number of themes emerged from these articles. Thirteen articles (68%) addressed the fact that people with disabilities experience ableism and discrimination due to negative attitudes, lack of understanding, and false stereotypes. Nine articles (47%) stated that role models are important for people with disabilities. Seven articles (37%) acknowledged that accepting disabilities is an important part of understanding disability. Six articles (32%) noted that teachers with disabilities can develop critical, reflective, pedagogical thinking and aim to reach all students by maintaining high expectations. Six articles (32%) stated that speech, hearing, and other communication disorders can affect an individual's career choices. Four articles (21%) examined student perceptions, noting that students viewed teachers with disabilities as effective educators and in some cases became their teacher's advocates. Four articles (21%) focused on how identity construction and formation (both in and outside of school) forms the foundation for future self-concept, goals, values, and beliefs. Three articles (16%) explained how society commonly views people with disabilities as heroic super cripples, an identity that reduces personhood status and limits future choices. Two articles (11%) detailed the classroom as a powerful arena for social change. Table 1 illustrates the themes found in the literature.

Table 1. Themes in the Literature

	Prevalence of Ableism in Schools	Importance of Role Models	Importance of Accepting Disabilities	Effective Practices of Teachers with Disabilities	Speech and Hearing Disorders and Career Choice	Positive Student Perception of Teachers with Disabilities	Importance of Identity Formation	Images of the Super-Disabled (or Super-Crip)	Classroom as Arena for Social Change
Altholz & Golensky, 2004	X	X	X		X		X		
Bramlett, Bothe, & Franic, 2006					X				
Daniels & Gabel, 2004	X	X	X		X		X		
Ferri, 2001	X	X	X	X		X			
Gabel, 2001	X		X	X		X	X	X	
Glen & Smith, 1998	X				X				

Griffith & Cooper, 2002	X	X							
Hahn, 1997	X								
Harrison & Lemke, 2000		X							
Hehir, 2002	X		X	X				X	
Holmberg, 2001	X			X		X			
Lehmann, Davies, & Laurin, 2000	X								
Longmore, 2000		X							
Mossman, 2002	X		X	X				X	X
Putnam, 2005	X	X	X	X	X				X
Roberson & Serwatka, 2000		X				X			
Roseman, 1999					X		X		
Scotch, 1998		X							
Wilson, Powney, Hall, & Davidson, 2005	X								

Methods

While completing the review of the literature, I participated in a number of self-reflection activities developed by the educator and researcher Valerie Janesick (2004) to generate data for this self-study. Since the literature review was constructed in conjunction with these self-reflection activities, research and reflection were enmeshed in an inextricable process. During a six-month period, I wrote haiku, created an autobiographical collage, constructed a YaYa box, and kept a reflective journal. I used a modified version of the Stevick-Collaizzi-Keen method described by Brown and Duke (2005) and McCarthy and Duke (2007) to organize the data into a series of word tables. The Stevick-Collaizzi-Keen method is a highly reductive method of data

analysis frequently used by researchers working within the phenomenological tradition of qualitative inquiry to systematically distill essential concepts, issues, and themes from text (Creswell, 2007).

The Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method adheres to the following systematic procedure: First, I identified “significant statements” in each article. For this study, these statements referred to those that (a) addressed general issues surrounding teachers with disabilities including but not limited to those that stutter, and/or (b) addressed general issues surrounding students with disabilities, (c) addressed the identity construction/self-esteem of students with disabilities; (d) addressed the importance of role models in identity construction, (e) addressed the intrinsic and/or extrinsic effects of discrimination, and/or (f) addressed the nature and/or development of disability pride and/or disability culture in all contexts.

Next, I developed a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping (verbatim) significant statements with formulated meanings. These formulated meanings signify my *analysis* of each significant statement.

Finally, I grouped the formulated meanings from all 19 articles into theme clusters (or emergent themes). These “emergent themes” embody the essential concepts from the entire review of the literature.

Findings

Table 2. Attitudes and Practices of Parents, Administrators, and Employers toward Teachers with Disabilities (generated from the review of the literature)

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Discrimination Against Teachers With Disabilities<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Teachers with disabilities experience discrimination from parents, administrators, and employers.b. Some disabilities have gained acceptance, while others continue to experience repression.c. Teachers with disabilities try to pass as nondisabled to gain equal rights for employment; this reinforces the power nondisabled society has over people with disabilities.d. Teachers with disabilities should not have to “overcome” their disability in order to be employed.2. Emotional Effects of Discrimination on People With Disabilities<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Profound and disturbing feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, frustration, shame, and fear result from discrimination.b. Future choices and opportunities remain elusive for those with disabilities resulting in feelings of apathy and hopelessness.3. Teachers with Disabilities as Highly Effective Educators<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Teachers with disabilities have increased understanding, sensitivity, empathy, and higher standards for students with disabilities. |
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- b. Teachers with disabilities use multiple modalities for instruction to accommodate their disability.
 - c. Teachers with disabilities respect alternative ways of learning and support differentiation.
4. Cultivation of Positive School Culture
- a. Accepting and celebrating disabilities in schools would foster a powerful school culture.
 - b. Schools that honor teachers and students with disabilities cultivate advocacy skills essential for life outside the classroom.
5. Purpose of Education
- a. Most school mission statements center on the self-actualization of community-minded students who can affect change in society; this cannot be achieved without the development of a solid sense of self-construct and identity in all students.

Table 3. How Teachers with Disabilities Affect the Identity, Experiences, and Attitudes of Students (generated from the review of the literature)

- 1. Negative Concept of Identity in Students With Disabilities
 - a. Students with disabilities are given messages of disease, abnormality, shame, incompetence, and intolerance.
 - b. These messages foster self-hatred, decrease self-confidence, and a fracture self-concept/identity.
- 2. Promotion of the Disability Continuum and Disability Culture
 - a. Schools must encourage students to move from shame to pride on the disability continuum.
 - b. Disability culture is a valid and definable culture.
 - c. As with any culture, schools must respect and provide opportunities to recognize, cultivate, and celebrate the culture of students with disabilities.
- 3. Teachers With Disabilities as Role Models for All Students
 - a. Students relate to teachers who have disabilities.
 - b. Role models are vital to the identity formation of students with disabilities.
 - c. As schools move increasingly towards inclusion and full mainstreaming teachers with disabilities are the very example of what these students could aspire to become. If schools do not hire such teachers, then what is the point of inclusion?
- 4. Classroom as Pseudo-Society
 - a. Our classrooms are the future of our society; they are the catalyst for fundamental changes in our world. The acceptance of teachers with disabilities in schools will transfer into the acceptance of people with disabilities in society.

Table 4. How My Experience with Disability Has Affected My Classroom Practices (generated from self-reflection activities)

<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Self-Doubt<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. The discrimination I have faced from society has reinforced feelings of self-doubt and shame in my life.b. I often questioned if I could be an effective educator because of my stuttering.c. It is easy for me to separate my professional abilities from my disability, but it seems difficult for parents, administrators, and employers to do so.2. Role Model of Positive Identity<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. I am a model of a person with a disability who has a positive identity.b. My students can look to me and see that they will find a place in society.c. All people with disabilities should be allowed to exist as they are without feeling the need to change to fit the desired, or accepted, norm.d. Through proud words and actions I communicate daily that my disability is a part of me and makes me who I am today.3. The Effect of Disability on Instruction<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. I use multiple intelligences for instructional delivery and honor numerous ways of knowing.b. I have high expectations for all my students because I know they can meet standards even though they experience disability.4. The Effect of Disability on Classroom Culture<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. My classroom supports open-minded, honest inquiry about disabilities.b. My classroom is a safe place to be who you are.c. My students and I are partners in advocacy.

Discussion

The findings of this self-study suggest that teachers with disabilities are a vital part of honoring and cultivating disability culture in our schools. Many of these conclusions resonate with my own experience as a teacher with a disability and are instrumental to my personal journey as a disability advocate. Identity construction, which is partially based on culture, is crucial to the self-development of students with disabilities. Toward this end, schools must honor disability culture. Teachers with disabilities, such as myself, are authentic examples of how disability and normality can coexist; we are excellent role models for all students. These teachers are usually highly qualified, capable, and maintain high standards, as they have had to work harder for what most people take for granted. Disabled and nondisabled students respond positively to such teachers and carry newfound perceptions into the world. The present cycle of discrimination must be eradicated. Employing teachers with disabilities is the fundamental catalyst for future societal change. Finally, the token acceptance of a few disabilities has not improved the situation for all teachers with disabilities, including teachers who stutter.

As a PWS, I have felt the shame, frustration, anger and ultimate despair Roseman (1999) states a teen who stutters felt when he “seriously contemplated suicide” (p. 16). For so long, failure and stuttering were synonymous to me. It is only recently that I have cautiously journeyed from shame to pride on the disability continuum. Yet still there are still times when, after stuttering outside of the classroom, I am caught off guard by the intolerance of the nondisabled society. Abject shame grips me, and I stumble two steps backward. Returning to the classrooms inspires hope after these dismal moments. My wish for all my students is that they would achieve a sense of pride in their disability culture and personal identity much earlier than I did.

If teachers with disabilities are not employed in our schools, then this dream will remain unrealized. When I read Griffith & Cooper (2001), I am resolutely reminded that their research finds, “Educators with disabilities are valuable to our schools. Their presence can influence the perceptions of coworkers and students as well as provide a role model for students to live their lives fully integrated into our society” (p.21). Unfortunately, most parents, administrators, and employers do not yet share their beliefs. In this phenomenological study, it has been my aim to destabilize the current educational employment system, which is so deeply rooted in institutionalized discrimination, and so inherently devastating to teachers and students, disabled and nondisabled alike, and ultimately society as a whole.

In my daily thoughts as a teacher, and as a person with a disability, I wrestle with the unjustness of the present system. My stammering speech doesn’t innately narrow my dreams; my dreams are narrowed when employers see my disability and not me. My disability is not an inherent problem; the problem is the way I am discriminated against in society. My views are supported by Michalko (2002), who states, “We do not suffer the condition of our impairments as medicine and the rest of society would have it, we ‘suffer’ our society. We suffer what our society makes of our impairments, and this, according to the social model, is ‘oppressive’” (p. 54).

Conclusion

I am a teacher who stutters, and yet my students understand and learn from me – yes, they even see me as an effective and capable educator. Most importantly, they trust and admire me. I want to be myself and be a teacher at the same time. I represent a normal form of human diversity I am a valuable role model for all students. I am even an asset, as Hahn (1997) states:

“Because of their experiences, persons with disabilities are in a unique position to acquire a resource that is not generally available to others. They may, in fact, be able to achieve a viewpoint and an approach to everyday problems that most people lack. Instead of regarding disability as a loss, therefore, it might actually be considered a gain – in experiences, perspectives, and opportunities for creativity...” (p. 36).

Why cannot parents, administrators, and employers see teachers with disabilities in this light? We are real teachers, authentic people, and educators of equal worth.

Creswell (2007) noted qualitative researchers frequently conclude their studies with creative elements “that speak to the essence of the study and its inspiration to the researcher” (p.

188). I conclude this study with a reflective cartoon to literally illustrate and figuratively “illuminate,” a pivotal theme that emerged from my self-study.

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