

“If They Could See Me Now!”: College Students Reflect on Their Experiences as Special Education Students in the K-12 System*

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Abstract: The current study examined the experiences of six students with learning disabilities in a four-year public, liberal arts college and discusses the meaning they attributed to their previous identification as special education students while in the K-12 system. Data was gathered through a semi-structured interview, questionnaire, and a sentence stem structure. A qualitative approach was used and results were analyzed using principles of content analysis. Themes emerging as noteworthy were: (a) the effect on relationships with peers, (b) lack of developmental knowledge by school support staff, (c) family support, and (d) the challenges of upholding expectations.

Keywords: special education, expectations, meaning-making

This article is dedicated to the memory of Willa Peterson, former Director of Expanding Horizons for eight years and of Disability Services for three at Fitchburg State College. Her spirit, compassion, and tenaciousness inspired all who knew her.

Rationale

This article was inspired by students from Kellner’s Behavioral Sciences classes and from Freden’s outpatient psychotherapy practice. Over the years, several of Kellner’s students mentioned the lack of expectations placed on them as a result of being labeled “special education students.” One, who refused special education services in tenth grade, despite protests from her teachers and guidance counselor, said, “If I had stayed in special education, I’d be working in Burger King now. No one expected me to go to college. I wouldn’t be here at all.” At the time, she was a senior graduating with honors and completing an internship in school counseling. Freden has heard several parents of students in special education programs note their children did much better in school when more was expected of them. One set of parents removed their teenager when the school recommended that he go to a trade school to “work with his hands.” He is now working in an architectural firm designing multimillion-dollar homes.

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of a small group of students in a four-year New England state-funded college and the meaning they attributed to their previous identification as special needs students, including implicit messages regarding what they were expected to accomplish in school, and beyond.

Review of the Literature

Philosophical Foundations of Stigmatization

Triano (2000) traces the stigmatization of disabilities back to eighteenth century France when separate public schools were established for deaf (1760) and blind (1784) students (p. 2). Segregated education for those with disabilities was founded on a medical model that was soon extended to people with mental retardation. The Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons, the first American school to specialize in educating students with disabilities, opened in 1816. The Elementary Education (Blind and Deaf Children) Act of 1883 charged British schools with educating blind and deaf children, and in 1899 the Elementary Education (Defective and Epileptic) Act extended this responsibility to children with physical disabilities. Children were classified into eight categories of “physical defect” to receive services and be placed in special schools underscoring the belief they could not benefit from “normal” public school instruction. Triano (2000, p. 4) noted that attitudes still prevail that children with disabilities cannot learn in regular classrooms, stating that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) “... require[s] medical categorization for eligibility purposes and attribute[s] the educational problems experienced by children with disabilities to the child’s disability and not to the failure of the regular education system.” Friedman (1997) argued the helping professions historically disempowered people by labeling them and defining their experiences for them. He recommends the helper and helpee co-construct the meaning of the helpee’s experience from a strength-based model, rather than having that experience defined solely by the professional.

While medical classification allowed parents and educators to advocate for children, it also placed the onus of the problem on the individual child rather than within the educational system. To provide the rationale for services, the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), the backbone of special education instruction, has been primarily-deficit focused, often minimizing a student’s strengths. Anzul, Evans, King and Tellier-Robinson (2001, p. 236) observe “... Special education students are viewed more in terms of their specific weakness rather than their total personalities, talents, interests, or the ways in which they function in other settings.” There is growing acknowledgment that students with learning disabilities may also be “gifted” and possess exceptional talent or abilities in at least one academic area (Dole, 2000).

Fortunately, many educators now also focus on the strengths of children with disabilities as well as their challenges. Students are encouraged to be active participants in their own education as they mature, for instance, the 1997 Amendments to IDEA helped facilitate this empowerment by switching responsibility from parents to students when they reach the age of majority and by emphasizing the importance of post-secondary transition planning (Council for Learning, 2004).

With this emphasis on student responsibility and an understanding of the capabilities of students with disabilities, an increasing number of students with disabilities are entering post-secondary education. The percentage of students with disabilities graduating from high school has clearly increased; however, figures vary from 30.5% (National Institute for Literacy, 2004), to 80% (Patwell & Herzog, 2000, p. 1) for the year 1998. Statistics on the percentage of full-time college freshmen with disabilities in 1998 vary from 9.8% (Council for Learning, 2004) to 34.3% (George Washington University, 2004, p. 13). Determining the percentage of students with disabilities who go on to post-secondary education is complicated by such factors as reporting criteria (self-

report versus school-based diagnosis) and definitions of various disabilities.

Reactions of Family, Peers, and Professionals to Students with Learning Disabilities

When families first receive a diagnosis of an illness or a disability that impacts learning, many parents initially feel guilt and sadness over “lost” dreams for their child’s future (Austin, 2000). Children who are faced with stressful life experiences need the influence of protective factors, such as parents, to counterbalance negative events (Werner, 1993). Intending to provide help and support, some parents take responsibility and decision making away from their children with learning disabilities, thus disempowering them further (Mitchell, 1998). When families received six ninety-minute school-based trainings, developed by the Illinois Service Resource Center and the Academic Development Institute, focusing on improving their understanding of special education and how to navigate the system, parents were better able to support their children in special education and work with school personnel (Stevenson, 2003).

Educational professionals may disempower students with learning disabilities when they “try too hard” to help them. Skrtic and Sailor (1996) note schools are not organized around the premise that students are capable of self-determination. When teachers work from a model where they are the experts and it is assumed students cannot articulate their own educational needs, neither students with learning disabilities nor students without learning disabilities are encouraged to view themselves as active participants in their own education. On a practical level, Patwell and Herzog (2000) note special education students are often given too much “informal” assistance. For example, when teachers allow extra time to complete work not specified in IEPs, students are less likely to develop the self-management skills necessary to negotiate larger and more demanding college systems.

Experiences in the classroom can reinforce feelings of stigmatization and marginalization. Baglieri and Knopf (2004) found efforts to accommodate students with learning disabilities results in special education students receiving instruction that is different and separate, and often less challenging, from that of the general curriculum. They observed that, “[S]uch ineffective instructional practices confirm the understanding of students with learning dis/abilities as less able. As such, even ‘included’ students labeled as having learning disabilities (LD) continue to be excluded, not by classroom location but by the instructional discourses that circulate the school” (p. 526). Bruck (1986, p. 365) observed, “[D]ifferential patterns of teacher-child interactions may shape the learning disabled child’s self-perception, and they may also serve as models for peers to react to learning-disabled children.” Social difficulties may be magnified if the child with a learning disability is placed in a special class (Bruck, 1986). In-depth interviews with people with learning disabilities who dropped out of high school revealed that for these students “personal opinions were neither sought nor valued in the school setting” (Lichtenstein, 1993, p. 8).

The experiences of children with learning disabilities are often shaped by gender-related societal expectations (Goldberg & Herman, 1993). When girls have trouble reading or writing, skills often believed easier for girls, parents and teachers may be more critical of their lack of success, and these students may internalize a sense of failure. In an elementary school founded on an “open concept” model designed to minimize

stigmatization of special education children, girls as young as first to third graders were viewed less positively by peers and more often socially rejected than boys with learning disabilities (Scranton & Ryckman, 1979).

Impact of Special Education Designation on Self-Concept

Students with learning disabilities who receive special education services sometimes attribute academic success to “easy work” (such as completing a worksheet rather than writing a book report) and blame their failures on a lack of help. Implicit is a sense they cannot do the work alone or that it must be easy and meaningless. Conversely, Palladino, Poli, Masi, and Marcheschi (2000) found students without disabilities more often attribute success or failure to effort and individual characteristics.

Academic problems are often compounded by social problems for students with learning disabilities. For example, 43% of a sample of 11-14 year-olds with learning disabilities met criteria for clinical depression in contrast to none in a control group without learning disabilities (Palladino et al., 2000, p. 145). From a meta-analysis of studies on the social and emotional adjustment of children with learning disabilities, Bruck (1986) found the social and emotional behaviors which often differentiate children with learning disabilities from children without learning disabilities are also found among children with other disabilities, those with emotional disturbances or epilepsy, and among low achievers. She concluded it is the stigma of labeling or academic failure rather than the disability itself that results in emotional difficulties for many children. Galvin and Hons (2003, p. 149) suggested it is not the actual impairment, but the “social construction of disability as an inferior status” that results in feelings of marginalization for the student.

Successful Students with Learning Disabilities

Students with learning disabilities who have achieved some success, whether it be by maintaining good grades or by keeping up with non-special education classmates, have a better sense of control over their environment than less successful students. Successful students with learning disabilities often pride themselves on strengths developed through their efforts to cope. Gerber and Reiff (1991) conducted in-depth interviews with 71 adults diagnosed with learning disabilities as children. A successful sub-group emerged, with personally satisfying careers, highly motivated educational attainments, and an acceptance and understanding of their learning disabilities. They reframed their disabilities as having some positive attributes (fostering coping strategies, learning to identify goals, and seeking mentors and support systems).

Students with learning disabilities who are successful in life tended to seek support from their families, and if unavailable, found support and mentors in teachers, school personnel, and friends (Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995; Spekman, Goldberg, & Herman, 1992; Werner, 1989). In interviews with high school seniors with learning disabilities, Werner (1993, p. 30) found many credited elders or peers with having helped boost their self-esteem, but “considered interventions by counselors, mental health professionals, and special educators of ‘little help’ to them.” Perhaps the lack of helpfulness the students attributed to their professional helpers reflected a healthy

desire to use their own voices rather than accept the opinions of the “expert” professionals. Foucault (1983) criticized helping professions for their attempts to gain knowledge, leading to a disempowering relationship with the “subject” who is not invited into a discourse on his or her own experiences.

In a study of fifty young adults with learning disabilities, Spekman et al. (1992, p. 167) found the 58% who achieved both successful employment and interpersonal relationships “seemed to compartmentalize their learning disability and saw it as only one aspect of their identity rather than defining themselves entirely by it.” Greenbaum et al. (1995) found 37% of college students with learning disabilities credited their own tenacity and hard work for their success. Sometimes anger and determination to prove others’ low assessments of them wrong motivated them to succeed. The desire to attend college was the strongest indicator a student would continue onto college (Farrell, Jr., Sapp, Johnson, & Pollard, 1994), suggesting that when students with learning disabilities felt empowered and responsible to facilitate their own success, they were more likely to do so.

Research Questions

This study was founded on the premise that learning disabilities are “both socially produced and culturally constructed” (Priestly, 2003, p. 1). We sought to understand how six students with learning disabilities in a four-year public New England institution perceived their experiences as special education students while in the K-12 system and the dynamic process through which their self-concepts developed as they interacted with the world. In particular, we asked the following: (a) What meanings do college students attribute to their previous experiences as special education students? (b) Do students believe their status as special education recipients impacted the expectations that others had of them? Did it change the expectations they had of themselves? (c) What supports and stressors do students with learning disabilities experience specific to their special education participation, and (d) Did students make a shift from a deficit-based model of self, as implied in the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), to a model based on competency? If so, how do they recall this process?

Methodology

Measures

Qualitative measures are well suited to investigating the meaning people ascribe to their experiences. McLeod (1996, p. 177) commented: “People may be silenced because they are not ‘authorized’ to tell their own story. They are prevented, by whatever means, from being the ‘author’ of the stories they tell about self.” Our intention was to make our participants the authors of their own stories. Evans (1998) noted when students were allowed to talk about their experiences openly in loosely structured interviews, points of view emerged that the researcher did not anticipate. Since this study was based on learning the students’ points of view, such a nonreductionist methodology was well suited.

Kellner introduced the study at a Disabilities Services Ice Cream Social; three

students signed up on the spot. Two participants referred friends, and another was referred by the College Tutoring Center. Each participant signed an informed consent form, chose a pseudonym (or was assigned one if preferred), and provided basic demographic information (type of learning disability, age at identification, type of placement, other diagnoses if applicable). Each participant completed three instruments. First they completed a questionnaire, consisting of eight items, which asked participants to respond to statements about their special education experiences on a scale of 1-5 (1 = *much better*; 2 = *better*; 3 = *about the same*; 4 = *worse*; 5 = *much worse*). Next, participants completed a sentence stems exercise, which asked them to complete sentences soliciting reflections on their experiences with special education. Finally they took part in an audio-taped interview, which was semi-structured so we would not constrain the content through our omission of important issues: Each participant was asked at the conclusion of the interview if there was anything to add we had not asked. The first interviewee mentioned feeling “left out” during the IEP process, so we added a question about the IEP process to subsequent interviews (see Appendix A).

Data Coding and Analysis

After transcription, Kellner coded the interview statements in categories of themes following the principles of content analysis methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and then Freden did an inquiry audit of the raw data to determine if the study was undertaken in a careful and systematic manner and if the first researcher’s analysis and constructions made sense (Lincoln & Guba). The QSR N6 computer program was used to aid in the data analysis.

The initial coding yielded sixteen categories. Based on the inquiry audit, and noting similarities in content, categories were grouped more broadly into the following nine items:

- Stigmatization
- Goals
- Significant Others and Resources
- Advocacy
- Hidden Advantages
- Stressors and Coping Mechanisms
- Self-Reflection
- Diagnosis and School’s Response
- Recommendations

Three overarching themes emerged across all three instruments: personal narratives, supports and stressors, and treatment by others (how they perceived others responding to them as a result of their special education status). By noting these three overarching themes, the researchers could look for similarities and/or contradictions among each participant’s responses. This technique, known as triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), serves as a cross-reference through which to substantiate impressions and pick up inconsistencies.

Table 1 shows how the questions were coded into the three themes. Note that due

to the wording of the questions, the scale was reversed on questions three through eight so the meaning would be consistent with the first two themes. Since the questionnaire was based on a scale of one to five, the researchers decided to code the interviews and the sentence completions on a similar scale, with higher ratings as those perceived as more favorable, as follows: 5 = *a completely progressive narrative in which the individual only tells stories of moving forward*;¹ 4 = *an essentially progressive stance but includes some negative circumstances or reactions*; 3 = *neutral*; 2 = *a primarily regressive narrative but with some sense of movement*; and 1 = *a totally regressive narrative*. Freden and Kellner independently assigned ratings to the interviews and the sentence completions, and then discussed them until they reached agreement on a final rating (see Table 2 for the coding of the sentence completions). Although ratings of sentence completions and interviews admittedly included some subjectivity, we devised this system to allow us to look at the three instruments to determine if data was consistent enough across the instruments to indicate it was valid.

Table 1
Coding of Questionnaire

Theme	Question
Narrative/Supports	If I had not received SPED services, I believe my academic performance now would be...
Narrative/Supports	If I had not received SPED services, I believe my selection of career options would be...
Narrative Others	Participation in SPED services made my attitude toward school Because of my involvement with SPED services, my parent(s) viewed my options for the future as...
Others	At least one of my teachers told me that SPED services would make my options for the future...
Others	When my friends became aware that I received SPED services, their opinions of me were...
Narrative/Supports	I believe my academic performance in high school was ___ as a result of receiving SPED services.
Others	As a SPED student, I thought my teachers believed my prospects for the future to be ___ compared to non-SPED classmates.

Table 2
Coding of Sentence Completions

Theme	Sentence Stem
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¹ Gergen (1999) suggested that individuals develop personal narratives to understand themselves and make sense of their worlds. He described two rudimentary narrative structures: "progressive," in which the narrator creates a story of events leading up to success, and "regressive," in which the events lead to failure and/or loss. Many people include elements of both in their life stories. Transformation occurs when the individual can turn a regressive narrative into a progressive one.

Supports/Narrative	The thing I found most useful about the services I received was...
Narrative	If I had not received special education services I would not be able to...
Supports	The thing that was least helpful about the services I received for me was...
Others	My parents believed the services I received...
Supports/Others	I think my teachers viewed me as...
Supports	I considered stopping special education services because ____, but then continued with them because...
Narrative	When I think of my life now, if I had not participated in the services that were offered to me, I would...
Narrative	When I think of my life now, the special education services have allowed me to...

Program Participants

All six participants were enrolled in a four-year New England public College, which served as a selection criterion. All achieved some degree of academic success. Five participants were female and one was male. They ranged in age from 19-27, with a mean of 21.7 and modes of 19 and 22. Two were freshmen, one a sophomore, one a junior, one a senior, and one a graduate student. Two previously attended community colleges, and two transferred from other four-year colleges. The mean grade level for initial diagnoses of LD was third grade, with modes of Kindergarten, fourth and sixth grades. In the aggregate total (participants could check off multiple categories), three reported disabilities in mathematics, two reported learning disabilities in written language, two reported reading disabilities, one reported auditory processing difficulties, and three reported other disabilities (1 blindness as a primary disability and memorization difficulties secondarily, 1 non-verbal learning disability, and 1 unspecified). None reported receiving services for confounding factors such as attention or mental health issues (see Table 3).

At the time of the most intensive services in Special Education, two were placed in a full-time resource room, one in a part-time resource room, and the remaining three received special help in the classroom. They all had IEPs through twelfth grade, and continued to receive minimal services in college through Disabilities Services or the Academic Success Center on campus, but only when they requested them.

Table 3
Study Participants

Name*	Age	Grade Diagnosis	Type of Disability	Most Extensive Services
Autumn	22	4 th	Math, other (unspecified)	Full-time resource room
Caroline	21	K	Written language, reading, math, auditory processing	Full-time resource room

Donna	19	4th	Non-verbal learning	Part-time resource room
Kayla	22	K	Written language, math, Cerebral Palsy	Special help in classroom
Luke	19	6 th	Reading, memorization	Special help in classroom
Suzanna	27	6 th	Blindness, memorization	Special help in classroom

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*Each student picked a pseudonym.

Results

Triangulation of Data

In looking at the data, it must be remembered that the interviews elicited more subtle and complicated responses than the other two instruments. Some participants left items blank on the sentence completions. This complicated the scoring of completions. The sentence completions coded as “others” pulled information on how they thought teachers and parents perceived them. The questionnaire included items relating to treatment by teachers, parents, and peers. Finally, the interview also included information on parents, teachers, peers, as well as other school personnel and other significant people in the participants’ lives. By looking at data for individual participants, rather than as a group, some variation among scores reflected the complexity of their experiences, and distinctions between the benefits of services versus difficulties with peers (see Table 4).

Table 4
Triangulation of Data: Scoring of Responses

Participant/Theme	Interview	Sentences	Questionnaire	Variance
Autumn:				

Narratives	2.0	3.5	3.00	1.5
Supports	3.0	4.0	3.00	1.0
Others	2.0	5.0	3.00	3.0
Caroline:				
Narratives	4.5	5.0	4.75	.5
Supports	4.0	3.0	4.67	1.67
Others	4.0	3.0	3.50	1.0
Donna:				
Narratives	2.5	5.0	3.75	2.50
Supports	2.0	5.0	3.33	3.00
Others	2.5	3.5	3.25	1.00
Luke:				
Narratives	4.0	5.0	3.50	1.50
Supports	4.0	3.0	3.67	1.00
Others	3.5	4.0	3.50	.50

Participant/Theme	Interview	Sentences	Questionnaire	Variance
Kayla:				
Narratives	4.0	5.0	3.75	1.25
Supports	4.0	2.0	3.33	2.00
Others	4.0	3.0	3.75	1.00
Suzanna:				
Narratives	4.0	5.0	4.25	1.00
Supports	4.0	3.0	4.33	1.33
Others	4.0	4.0	4.00	0.00

Individual Student Responses

During the interview, Autumn maintained she would have done just as well without special education services, and that the stigmatization was very difficult for her. Her responses on the questionnaire were consistent with not wanting to acknowledge any benefits of the added help. The high score for “others” on the sentence completion was consistent with her assertion that others saw her as “perfectly fine” while the low interview score reflected the irritation she felt with school personnel.

Caroline left two items on the sentence completion blank (one for supports and one coded supports/others) which compromised the coding. Caroline had positive responses about services during the interview and on the questionnaire, responding that services she received made a substantial difference in her life.

Donna’s low scores on the interview may relate to the delay she experienced in receiving services; her teacher refused an evaluation calling her “lazy.” Her seventh grade special education teacher had a dramatic impact on her skill development as well as her confidence. Few people, except her parents, encouraged her or supported her. Nevertheless, Donna graciously acknowledged the help she received, and this is reflected in the slightly higher scores on the questionnaire.

Luke's high scores in the interview and the sentence completions reflected his determination to make the most of life's experiences. This theme emerged more strongly in interviews and sentence completions than it did on the questionnaire with set selections. While Luke clearly found some services helpful and his school-based liaison (paraprofessional advocate and service coordinator) indispensable, he also felt the stigma of special education status. The variation in his scores may be a function of the depth of experiences he discussed.

Kayla's experiences were basically positive, as her scores for "narratives" and "others" reflected, except for ongoing struggles with her high school teaching aide. The major discrepancy in her scores for "supports" resulted from the fact Kayla only completed one item on the sentence completion which she answered negatively. The scores on the other two instruments reflected a more global assessment of her sense of supports.

Suzanna did not complete one sentence for the "supports" category; this may account for the fact that this score is the lowest of all. Otherwise, Suzanna's scores were all heavily on the positive side indicating a consistency in the data. Reasons for Suzanna skipping the "supports" category were unknown.

Meanings Attributed to Special Education Status

Four participants expressed feelings of stigma related to receiving special education services, including "not being normal" or "being different," being singled out, and shame. All recalled peers either shying away from them, teasing them or ostracizing them. The special attention, particularly when pulled out of classes or lunch, had social consequences. Autumn recalls: "It was just so embarrassing, 'cause I was trying to be as normal as I could be. And I just didn't want to be associated with it (special education) if I didn't have to be, you know." Luke found the hardest part of receiving special education services was "...they made you different. They put you apart from everyone else."

Four respondents tried to distance themselves from the special education identification. Luke ensured that his teachers knew him as a student before he introduced his special needs:

"If you don't tell them (teachers) right away, and you just participate in class, and you come tell them the truth about how you sometimes need some thing sometimes, with either extra time with tests or just better explanations of the material, because you just didn't process it all. Um, and because you didn't come out right away, they never noticed. They just thought you were a regular student, had regular grades."

It was important to Autumn that her special education classes seemed like normal classes: "But it was like a regular class too. We had tests. We had to do this, we had to do that. We had projects... I'll take it with people who are part of special ed, but they're still treating the class like it's a normal class."

Impact on Expectations

Autumn and Caroline believed less was expected of them than their non-special education peers; the other four felt they were usually “treated like any other student.” While Caroline believed the decreased expectations negatively impacted her readiness for college, Autumn appreciated the slightly less demanding curriculum because it allowed her to excel. Donna, on the other hand, remembered her teachers pushed her to do more: “I think they wanted me to come up to them and tell them when I had a problem.” Kayla usually felt that she was viewed as capable, except by one teacher who negatively pre-judged her on the first day of class when she entered with an aide. Luke believed that since he held high expectations for himself, the school followed suit: “I think I was the one who didn’t expect any less of me... If I asked for it, they would give it to me (less work). I didn’t want that.”

Suzanna believed her teachers’ low expectations were not based on her special education status, but on the fact that none of her older siblings graduated from high school. However, the school’s delay in acquiring adaptive technology for her blindness prohibited her from participating in such activities as science labs, and she fell behind. Thanks to her mother’s advocacy, Suzanna obtained the adaptive technology (AT) in high school. Even with AT supports, she needed to do extra work to catch up for time lost before she used AT.

The participants had varying experiences with the IEP process. Only Autumn felt included and listened to in the process. Suzanna recalls: “... They would talk about me like I wasn’t in the room.” Both she and Donna let their parents do the advocating. Not wanting to miss classes, Luke chose not to attend. Kayla did not find it important to go to the IEP meetings when old enough to attend because she no longer needed many services.

At some time in their educational careers, each participant became motivated to attend college, with or without school support. Caroline always wanted to be a teacher, but her high school guidance counselor discouraged her from applying to college. Autumn received mixed messages: “... They said, ‘Your grades are really good and you can go to college and do this, do this, do this.’ But I can’t tell you a college which you can go to, that will be able to accommodate you.’ And I was like, ‘Uh?’” Only Kayla and Suzanna found their guidance counselors helpful in the college search process. Kayla appreciated the counselor’s advice to attend a community college and felt it prepared her for a four-year school, but found the reduction in services in college difficult because no one told her she would have to pay for an aide herself. She was terrified and furious when she was told. Luke believes he would not be at college if it were not for his special education liaison. He remembers that she and his parents were “...talking about college all the time.”

The desire to prove others’ low expectations of them wrong was a powerful motivator. Kayla recalls with pride: “You know, it was just downers and everything from the day I was born. It was like, ‘She’s not gonna walk, she’s not gonna talk, she’s only gonna...’ And I keep proving everybody wrong!” When Suzanna’s doctor told her to stay home in sixth grade, she “tried it” but returned to school with increased enthusiasm for learning. She decided to attend college in her junior year when her Braille teacher took her around to various colleges. Shortly after receiving her eye prosthetic, she began college despite her doctor’s recommendation to take a year off to adjust.

Stressors, Supports and Coping Mechanisms

Participants identified several stressors associated with receiving special education services including: wanting to be like everyone else (n = 3); receiving unwanted, and in their eyes unneeded, assistance (n = 3); academic worries (n = 2); and struggling to receive needed services (n = 2). Two participants experienced stress when the schools delayed providing services. Donna's mother noticed difficulties before her teachers and insisted on testing, but the school refused since her teacher said she was "lazy." Suzanna's mother researched and presented programming options to the school, and then placed the school in a position in which they had to comply to meet IDEA requirements.

Academic difficulties caused severe stress for Donna and Caroline, especially when younger and less able to handle frustration. Donna would "give up and cry," and although grateful for her mother's help with schoolwork, found "...not being able to do it myself was really hard." At school, however, she remained positive: "... I was such a nice kid, I was really sweet; all the teachers loved me. And then at home I was really mean and I didn't... like I was mad and angry at my parents." Caroline's experience was similar: "When I was younger, I gave up. I didn't really realize I would be able to be successful when I was younger." When interviewed, Kayla was struggling with the required college math course. She articulated the struggle with self-blame that many with disabilities feel: "There's no reason for me to put myself down. There's nothing I'm doing wrong. It's not because I'm not trying. I have to make myself realize it's not worth putting myself down for it."

Sometimes services themselves caused stress. Autumn perceived school personnel as "breathing down her back." She criticized the school for not re-evaluating the necessity of services for each student: "They just babied me because they were used to babying everyone." Kayla's elementary school aides presented invaluable techniques to help her understand material, but by high school she felt "annoyed" that her aide "just followed her around." One middle-aged aide, suffering from a back problem, frequently directed anger or frustration at Kayla, once calling her a "bad little girl" for not cleaning out her backpack. While the services Luke received as a freshman provided skills necessary to succeed in high school, they became "babysitting" afterwards. He sometimes made himself "look busy" so teachers and aides would leave him alone.

Responses coded as "stigmatization" overlapped those coded as "peers" considerably: 20% (Kayla), 36% (Luke), 58% (Donna) and 72% (Autumn). Only Caroline and Suzanna did not connect peers with feelings of stigma. But Caroline does recall that when placed in the resource room "...My friends started teasing. They noticed that I wasn't in their classroom and they stopped hanging out with me." When pulled out of class, Donna remembered her fellow students were "very mean" to her. Half of the participants reported peers teased them for having an easier workload or for needing additional assistance. Luke hesitated to ask for additional time on tests, as required by his IEP, because "...if I did ask for it, the eyes would be looking at me." To avoid teasing, he told friends he was going to study period when in fact he was going to the Resource Room. Not surprisingly, peers became more important during adolescence. Three participants recalled feeling like "outcasts" in middle/high school. Suzanna felt she was

missing out: "...My fellow classmates were going, were learning a lot more than me. Um... and then they got their [drivers] licenses." Three participants found their initial disability diagnosis to be the most difficult time in terms of stigma. The five females distinguished peers from "true friends," who were not affected by their special education status.

All found ways to cope with frustration. Autumn "brushed it off." Caroline and Donna relied on their strengths and used strategies learned in class to help with academics. Three participants learned to pace themselves and established helpful routines. Caroline found one-on-one and small group instruction helpful. When frustrated, she would "sit down and spend a minute or two in order to calm down." For Suzanna, finding humor in silly situations really helped, and travel with the Camps for the Blind also alleviated stress. When all else failed, she threw alarm clocks across her bedroom. Luke chose not to focus on his disability: "I'd rather not be dwelling in my... my Special Ed."

Four participants found school personnel provided both support and stress; Donna only recalled positive interactions while Autumn recalled primarily negative ones. Although Caroline felt unsupported by her elementary school teachers, her high school guidance counselor and the school psychologist, and her seventh grade special education teacher taught her strategies to be successful. Suzanna felt supported by most of her teachers, including those for Braille and mobility, her advocate, and her high school vice principal and guidance counselor. One "very supportive" paraprofessional helped Kayla get involved with television, a dream of hers. Kayla's friendships with "parental figures" gave her a different perspective on life than just spending time with peers.

Luke found most teachers supportive, except those "... near retirement, [who] kind of find it a drag to have a special needs student in their class. Thinking that they need so much more than everyone else and it's just going to slow their class down." His drama teacher mediated for him with such teachers: "He talked to the teachers about what a good person I was. 'Would you mind red-carding him in because he really won't slow your class down; he won't be a problem.'" Overall, positive relationships were spoken of in extremely glowing terms, negative interactions were often recalled with anger, annoyance or sadness.

Family also played a key role for all participants. Three credited their mothers as a major reason for their current academic success. Parents helped advocate for services and managed teasing or jealous siblings who resented the additional attention the special needs child received. Luke stated his parents believed his services were "phenomenal." Most parents were pleased with services once implemented. Only Autumn reported her father thought she did not need services since she was doing "perfectly fine" and viewed the professionals involved as "a bunch of quacks." Autumn convinced him to allow her to continue her IEP because she found the testing accommodations helpful and because, "It's nice to know if I want something, it's there." Sometimes parents were "too supportive," as Kayla's father was when he did simple tasks for her. Once, she spilled a glass of water and as her father began to clean it up, she asked, "How am I supposed to be independent, if you're not letting me clean up water off the floor?"

Learning to self-advocate was a turning point for all female participants. Suzanna recalls an IEP meeting in which "...one teacher asked, 'Suzanna, what do you want?' And I started talking, and I haven't stopped telling them what I want..." Suzanna believes she would not be successful now, despite her abilities, if she had not learned how to self-advocate from her mother and two junior high school teachers. Autumn and Kayla both noted the importance of being able to reject services. Kayla reflected: "...Things that might be right, even necessary, at one time in your life, but now... may not be. May even be annoying, or a problem at another time in your life." Luke felt empowered when his teachers would "... think past it [special education] and forgot how I'm on it," as well as through extra-curricular activities such as music, drama and volleyball.

Understanding their disabilities helped the participants to take charge of their lives. Donna's parents answered her questions about her disability and helped her understand she was not "stupid," but just "learned differently." In college, Donna had additional testing and gained a clearer understanding of her disability; the new knowledge allowed her to self-advocate. During the interview, Luke demonstrated a good sense of his strengths and weaknesses. When asked how he developed this understanding, he remarked, "I really think it was the special education services, as much as I don't probably want to admit it."

Participants were motivated by parental expectations or by the success of older siblings. Caroline appreciated her mother's encouragement to pursue her goal to be a teacher. Donna was partially motivated by her parents' expectations for her and her brother. Kayla remembers her cousin confronted her about her future: "... She was like, 'Which resume do you think people will pick up?'She kind of pushed me along to realize what I am and who I can be." For Kayla, seeing her older sister graduate from college was inspirational. Luke's older brother excelled academically, and he did not want to lag behind despite acknowledging they had different strengths.

Half of the participants found positive assets to their disabilities, much like Gerber and Reiff's (1991) successful group. Allowed by his IEP to choose his elementary school teachers, Luke remembers having "tons of great teachers." Suzanna believes her illness and accompanying disability brought her closer to her sister, and her two younger siblings developed an increased appreciation for those with disabilities through their interactions with her. Both Kayla and Suzanna treasured camp and travel experiences available to them because of their disabilities. When faced with the loss of her eyesight, Suzanna framed learning Braille as having the benefit of a second language.

Achieving success helped participants develop progressive narratives. Kayla's self-image changed from one of needing lots of help to that of an independent woman. She recalled seeing an old classmate while shopping: "...I think, some of them saw me as so dependent upon another person. Now it's like, 'What? You're in college doing what?'" Caroline's self-image changed drastically after seventh grade when "...a really good special ed teacher worked with me a lot – helped me explain things and got me started... I know before seventh grade, it was hard for me in school. But once that year came, it seemed like everything changed." For Autumn, receiving good grades motivated her to continue to do so. During the interviews, three participants prided themselves on their grades.

Having benefited from the support of individualized services, several participants

are now considering careers helping others. Caroline hopes to be a special education teacher, Luke is considering technical education as well as other options, and Suzanna is training to be a mental health counselor. Suzanna notes, "I think that I should be spending time on other people, instead of self-reflecting. So, focusing on the other people, other things I can do, other ways I can help, that's one of my coping skills that gets me through issues."

Participant Recommendations

Based on their experiences with special education systems, the participants suggested the following to future students: keep minimal services while trying your best to do it on your own, set goals, learn to self advocate, ask questions, develop good study habits, and find people who will listen. They recommended schools hire only people who can actually do the job, and provide peer education on disabilities to help ease the social difficulties they endured. The participants' overall conclusions provided ample discussion points for students and service providers alike.

Discussion

Although the participants generously offered their views, this was a Caucasian, mostly female, opportunistic sample from the Northeast. Only one possible gender difference emerged: the emphasis females placed on friends, often calling them "true friends" and distinguishing them from peers, versus the more moderate distinctions that Luke made. Since adolescent girls tend to focus on relationships more than boys of this age, this may account for the increased significance they attached to this distinction.

All participants sought and found supports from teachers, paraprofessionals, liaisons, other adults, and occasionally friends, as successful students with disabilities often do (Greenbaum et al., 1995; Spekman et al., 1992; Werner, 1989). Parents often provided a "protective factor" (Werner, 1993) through their advocacy for services, by helping their children gain an understanding of their difficulties, by assisting with schoolwork, and through intervening with teasing siblings. The participants reported they had similar views as their parents did about their services. This suggests how significant parents are in shaping their children's perceptions of services.

Teachers may not view the full range of a special education student's emotional experience. Donna and Luke both understood the benefits of being liked by teachers. Donna only vented the depth of her frustration within the safety of her home. Although no participants recalled feeling depressed, Donna's anger may have been a mechanism for warding off depression. Three other interviewees recalled residual anger. Palladino et al. (2000) found depression in almost half of 11-14 year olds with learning disabilities. It is unclear whether these respondents chose not to focus on any feelings of childhood or adolescent depression, or simply did not experience depression relative to their disabilities

Although all but one participant acknowledged the helpfulness of educational services, all experienced the "social construction of disability as an inferior status" (Galvin & Hons, 2003, p. 149). Four recalled the teasing and/or ostracism by peers that often accompany a special education designation (Bruck, 1986; Lichtenstein, 1993).

Caroline and Donna's experiences were consistent with Bruck's (1986) finding that social difficulties may be magnified when a student is moved to a special class placement. Resilience to surviving feelings of being an outcast may separate college students with learning disabilities from those who do not attempt post-secondary education.

Autumn repeatedly mentioned teachers told her to "slow down" and she found everyone else "too slow." These vignettes, along with her fast-paced speech, are consistent with borderline attention and/or hyperactivity issues. Since all six respondents reported peer difficulties as special education students, and only one may have had borderline attention issues, this study does not support Bruck's (1986) suggestion that social difficulties may be a function of hyperactivity rather than the specific learning disability.

The participants embodied the profile of the successful college student as self-determined, working toward realistic goals, using problem-solving strategies, and choosing people and environments that support their learning (Council for Learning, 2004). This sample did not uphold findings that special education students attribute academic success to the easiness of the work and blame a lack of help as reason for their failures (Palladino et al., 2000). Only Autumn acknowledged the modified curriculum (i.e., Introduction to Chemistry rather than the standard high school Chemistry class) helped her excel. While Caroline did not mind the decreased expectations; she now believes it did not adequately prepare her for college. The others wanted and sought at least a "normal" curriculum, and Luke chose a college level math course. None blamed others for their difficulties. All prided themselves on accomplishments, past and present.

The participants displayed motivation, a realistic understanding of their disabilities (Bruck, 1987), and the persistence typical of successful college students with disabilities (Vogel et al., 1993). They viewed their learning disabilities as one part of their lives, not their whole identities (Spekman et al., 1992). Five of six viewed their own tenacity and hard work as responsible for their success. Proving others' low assessments of them wrong was a strong motivator, similar to the findings of Farrell, et al. (1994).

Because only two participants found their guidance counselors helpful in the college search process, a question emerges as to whether guidance counselors have reduced expectations of special education students, as in Caroline's case. Lack of adequate guidance staffing may result in counselors focusing more on higher performing students. Since all participants are now successful in college, guidance counselors may need to re-examine their advising of special education students. This trend may continue into college. Luke recalls during freshman orientation when he mentioned his goal of achieving a 3.3-3.5 GPA, he felt "almost laughed at" and was told how difficult that would be. The two students who first attended two-year colleges found the extra support and smaller campuses helpful in preparing them for a four-year school. Guidance counselors should consider community colleges as "stepping stones" for students they may not otherwise encourage on to higher education.

Several mentioned they felt their aides "smothered" them while in high school; what once was supportive became "annoying," to use Kayla's word. No such criticisms emerged regarding teachers. One reason for this distinction may be that teachers study child and adolescent development and have at least been exposed to special education issues. Many paraprofessionals, however, have no such formal training. Training of

paraprofessionals varies as some districts employ only certified teachers as aides, but others only require a high school diploma. The well-intentioned, nurturing aide may have difficulty setting age-appropriate expectations for adolescents. This suggests the importance of providing all special education personnel, particularly paraprofessionals, with a solid understanding of adolescent development and disability-related issues.

Several factors helped participants develop progressive narratives, including the ability to self-advocate, feelings of accomplishment after hard work, and the support of family, school personnel, or friends. Since self-advocacy seems a key to empowerment, it is recommended that schools make a concerted effort to include adolescents in the IEP process. Perhaps the ability to develop progressive narratives about their experiences and their potential for post-secondary advancement distinguishes special education students who go on to college from those who do not; it is suggested this be further researched.

College students with disabilities are in a unique position to reflect on their childhood experiences because many have gained the vocabulary to look at constructs such as gender roles, expectations and stereotypes. It is suggested future research look at the commonalities and differences of how male and female college students recall their experiences as special education recipients along the lines of peer interaction and teacher expectations. In addition, further research on programs designed to aid peer acceptance of students of learning disabilities would be helpful in reducing the stigma students with disabilities experience. Finally, research in general on the academic and non-academic issues correlated with future student success will help guide decision making.

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Appendix A Semi-structured Interview Guide

- You have had some success, you are in college and that is an accomplishment. And you deserve credit for that. Could you tell me a bit about how the special education services you received either helped you, or not, to get here.
- What do you think your teachers expected of you? Did they ever talk to you about college, career, or other future goals?
- How about your parents, did they talk to you about college, career, or future goals?
- Did you think you parents and your teachers, guidance counselors, principals, etc. had common expectations for you?
- What were your greatest sources of support while you were in special education?
- What were the biggest stressors for you?
- How did you handle the frustration? Did you ever get in trouble?
- Are there ways that your challenges with learning disabilities helped you to develop particular coping skills?
- How challenging do you think the SPED curriculum was compared to that in other classes?
- How did your friends perceive the fact that you were getting special education services?
- If you have siblings, what did they think about you receiving special education services?
- Were you included in the IEP process? Could you tell me a bit about that process for you?
- If you had to identify one thing, or person, responsible for your success now, what

would it be?

What else do you think we should know to understand your experiences as previous special education students that we did not ask directly?

What other questions should we be asking you?

Thank you for your participation.