Teachers with Learning Disabilities:

A View From Both Sides of the Desk

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative multicase study was to explore the perceptions of individuals who could speak from both sides of the special education desk—as students and as teachers. The three participants for this study each received special education services for learning disabilities while in school and were currently teaching students with learning disabilities. Specifically the study focused on how participants' past experiences with receiving special education services influenced their current practice as special education teachers. Participants' views on service delivery models, the importance of teacher expectations, and the value of conceiving a learning disability as a tool rather than a deficit are discussed.

When a teacher with learning disabilities is also teaching a class of students with learning disabilities, an extraordinary opportunity for study exists. (Gerber, 1998, p. 41)

They know how they experienced school and they can tell us. (Reid & Button, 1995, p. 612)

esearchers are increasingly relying on longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term efficacy of special education services for students with learning disabilities (LD). As Levine and Nourse (1998) suggested, despite its limitations, "the follow-up study in education has been a useful tool for producing a picture of postschool life for people with and without disabilities" (p. 213). Yet, because of conflicting findings and varying methodologies, it remains difficult to draw firm conclusions or generalizations from recent literature on adults with LD in regard to postschool adjustment (Levine & Nourse, 1998). Moreover, much of the professional literature fails to elicit personal narratives or insider perspectives of adults with LD in regard to their experiences

with or attitudes about special education services (Reid & Button, 1995). Therefore, what we know about employment rates, income, or other markers of adult adjustment often has not been informed by in-depth qualitative study of individual stories or experiences with schooling or transition, even though, as Gerber (1998) contended, adults with LD are "rarely devoid of an opinion regarding the effectiveness and overall value" (p. 41) of such services. This study aims to draw out the stories of a particular group of adults with LD who can tell us firsthand how they experienced special education, first as students receiving services and now as teachers providing services to others.

Review of Outcome Studies

The findings of Gerber and his associates (Gerber, Ginsberg, & Reiff, 1992; Gerber, Reiff, & Ginsberg, 1997) documented variables associated with employment success and adult adjustment among a group of successful adults with LD. This series of land-

mark studies on adults with LD marked an important shift from focusing on deficits and predictors of failure to analyzing factors associated with success and adult adjustment. Even more pertinent to the present study, however, is Gerber's (1998) follow-up study of T. J., an adult with LD, during his first 2 years as a teacher of students with LD. In that study, T. J. recounted several issues also discussed by participants in the present study, for example, making difficult decisions about disclosure, having shared experiences with students, and negotiating the sometimes difficult position they find themselves in as advocates for their students. Instead of rating T. J.'s experiences as either successful or unsuccessful, Gerber invited us to discern within an ongoing narrative some of the more complicated and even ambivalent feelings T. J. experienced in negotiating his first 2 years of professional employment.

Several other published longitudinal studies on adults with LD have painted a very different picture from the successful-adult studies. Researchers have reported difficulties in educational attainment, employment, social adjustment, and literacy (see Note 1). Data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study, reported by Wagner and others (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Marder & D'Amico, 1992; Wagner et al., 1991), have documented some of the persisting problems experienced by adults with LD as a group, including higher dropout and unemployment rates and lower rates of participation in postsecondary training or education as compared to their nondisabled peers. Other studies have chronicled problems with underemployment of adults with LD, including lower wages and more part-time employment (Reder & Vogel, 1997). Still others have reported lower functional literacy skills among adults with LD (Reder, 1995) and compounding negative outcomes for girls and women with LD (Levine & Edgar, 1995; Wagner, 1992).

Despite inconsistencies across outcome studies (see Note 2), particularly on rates of unemployment and dropout statistics, longitudinal studies like these have been important sources of information for evaluating the efficacy of special education services and for justifying the need for expanding transition services for adolescents and adults with LD. Although outcome studies provide quantifiable data on a range of postschool outcomes for adults with LD, those findings are based on comparative research focusing on group effects, thereby homogenizing within-group variation. Attending to heterogeneity, however, can provide critical insights. Understanding how adults with LD have experienced different kinds of special education services and how they rate the quality and long-term efficacy of those services would help fill in the gaps in our existing knowledge base on transition.

For the present study we sought out a particularly relevant source of such information: adults with LD who have been recipients, and are currently providers, of special education services subsequent to the passage of P.L. 94-142. We believed that these individuals, having been on both sides of the special education desk, would have dual experiences and multivoiced perspectives that could offer the field important insights regarding the evolving practice of special education.

Following Kincheloe's (1991) lead, we invited these teachers to participate as active producers of knowledge and honored their capacity for critical self-reflection. We positioned the participants as important agents of educational transformation. We asked participants to reflect on their past experiences and to examine how their experiences inform their current practice. Moreover, rather than reviewing the literature and presenting it in isolation, we placed participants' stories into conversation with findings from the professional literature when relevant-positioning the participants as equally valid voices of authority (see Note 3). Specifically, we focused on the following research questions:

- How do individuals who are currently teaching students with LD and who have received special education services during their school careers view the special education services they received? and
- 2. How do their past experiences with receiving special education influence their current practice?

Method

The purpose of this investigation was to explore the perceptions of individuals who had received special education services for LD and who were currently teaching students with LD. Specifically, the study focused on how participants' past school experiences while receiving special education services influenced their current practice as special education teachers. Because of the preponderance of studies that conceive of learning disabilities as problems; deficits; or something to

diagnose, classify, measure, quantify, and remediate (Gregg & Phillips, 1996; Zola, 1993), it has been said that the field of LD is "ripe for qualitative research" (Bos & Richardson, 1994, p. 198). A hallmark of qualitative research is its focus on insiders' viewpoints and the knowledge that can be gained from such perspectives (Stainback & Stainback, 1988). As Reid and Button (1995) suggested, "We [as researchers and service providers] need to learn to listen with an open, sensitive, and inquisitive mind and not just with . . . rational judgement" (p. 612).

Participants

Participants for this investigation were sought through referrals from several special education faculty who recommended current or former students who had openly disclosed receiving special education services for LD in the context of graduate work in special education. We also utilized "snowball sampling" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 70), asking participants to nominate others who might be interested in participating; however, none of our participants could think of anyone who would qualify for the study. To qualify for participation, individuals had to have (a) received special education services during their K-12 education no earlier than 1975 (following implementation of P.L. 94-142) and (b) been teaching K-12 students with LD at the time of the study. Although several colleagues suggested undergraduate and graduate students who had openly discussed their LD in the context of their college classes, many of these students were not yet teaching special education and thus did not qualify for the study. Although restricting the study to individuals who could speak as both providers and recipients of special education services limited our sample size, we strongly believed that we should limit the study to individuals with this dual perspective.

The results of this study are based on in-depth, semistructured interviews

with three teachers who met the dual criteria for the study. All were teaching students with LD in resource rooms in public schools in a south central metropolitan area: one each in elementary, middle school, and high school. All participants had received bachelor's degrees and were taking graduate classes in special education. Two participants were male and one was female; all were White and in their late 20s. Each had received special education services through resource room or pull-out programs. John, who was 28 at the time of his interview, had taught students with LD in a resource room for 4 years. He was diagnosed as having LD and began receiving special education services in the 5th grade. John listed reading comprehension as the area most affected by his LD. Rose, who was 29 at the time of her interview, had taught for two years as an LD resource room teacher. She was diagnosed as having a learning disability in the 3rd grade. She listed reading and written expression as areas of deficit. Tay was 28 at the time of his interview and had been teaching in a resource room for 6 years. He was diagnosed at age 6 and, like Rose, listed reading and written expression as areas of difficulty.

The interview questions were designed to identify the kinds of services the participants received and how their previous experiences with special education services influenced their current practices, teaching philosophy, and interactions with students. Our interview questions asked participants to describe the kinds of services they received from the time they were identified through college and how they rated the quality of those services. Participants were also asked about how they felt about receiving services and the label of LD, how they and others perceived their LD, and ways that their past experiences influenced their current practice. One interview took place at a university; the other two were conducted in the participants' classrooms after school hours. Each interview lasted approximately 1½ to 2 hours.

Design

The design for this study was a qualitative multi-case study approach following a constant comparative method for analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method is suited for developing and refining theory grounded in a number of cases (Bos & Richardson, 1994). In this approach, analysis and data collection occur "in a pulsating fashion-first the interview, then the analysis and theory development, another interview, and more analysis, and so on" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 72). Thus, based on the "doubling back" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 74) conventions of this method, our initial coding scheme and core categories were further developed and refined with each subsequent interview. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed prior to coding. HyperQual 2 (Padilla, 1993), a qualitative software analysis program, was used to facilitate coding of the data.

Findings

The findings for this study coalesced around three related themes, each of which focused on a key paradox, or tension, between participants' experiences with receiving and providing special education. The first theme, which we call "push-pull," highlights the ways that participants felt "pushed around" by the pull-out service delivery model and involves an examination of their current beliefs about inclusion for students with LD. The second theme explores how participants' current teaching philosophies have been influenced by their desire to counteract low expectations and their belief that even with the best intentions, too much help can be disempowering to students with LD. Finally, the third theme traces participants' transformation from silence to voicefrom perceiving their own learning disability as a deficit or something to try to hide from others to using disclosure as a pedagogical and motivational tool for their students. In the following

sections we explore each of these themes as participants reflect on their past experiences as students in special education and on their current practice.

Push-Pull: Service Delivery Models

During the 1960s, when LD was emerging as a distinct field of study and as a recognized disability category for special education eligibility, grouping students identified as LD in homogeneously self-contained classrooms was the preferred educational placement. In 1966, for example, the estimated enrollment of students identified as LD in self-contained classrooms was 67% (Lovitt, 1989). After the enactment of P.L. 94-142 in 1975, more emphasis was placed on educating students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Traditionally, placing students with LD in general education classes for some part of the school day, a practice commonly referred to as "mainstreaming," has been considered the least restrictive environment. This practice is evident in the data from the 1995-1996 school year, which show that the two most frequent placements for students with LD were the general education classroom (41.1%) and the resource room (39.58%; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). After the reauthorization and renaming of P.L. 94-142 to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), in 1997, LRE has been interpreted as requiring an education with nondisabled peers within the general education classroom as much as possible. For the majority of students with LD, participation in the general education classroom for all or most of the day is considered the least restrictive placement. Thus, "increasingly, students with learning disabilities . . . are receiving their education within general education classroom settings" (Klingner & Vaughn, 1999, p. 23); however, many of these students continue to describe special education as a place outside of general education, rather than a set of services provided (Reid & Button, 1995).

All of our participants received special education services after the enactment of P.L. 94-142, and all received resource room or pull-out services beginning during the later part of the 1970s and continuing through the later part of the 1980s. Research findings have been mixed concerning the efficacy of the kinds of resource room or pull-out models that our participants experienced. Smith (1994) reviewed research concerning resource rooms and reported both advantages and disadvantages. Advantages included increases in the attending behavior and academic achievement of students in resource rooms and a lack of established negative impact on peer acceptance or self-concept as a result of students' attending resource rooms. Disadvantages included that students missed valuable lessons and enjoyable activities, and felt stigmatized for being sent out to get special help, and that the resource room teacher and general classroom teacher failed to coordinate instruction. A qualitative study by Reid and Button (1995) documented on a more personal scale some of the damaging and stigmatizing aspects of special education services and labels as reported by several adolescents with LD. The students in their study reported experiences of social isolation and victimization, as well as feelings of being misunderstood and devalued by others.

Rather than slipping through the educational cracks, as do many adults who are identified later in their schooling, participants in this study had all experienced the special education system firsthand, as students. All three participants could recall when they began receiving services: John at age 10 or 11, Jay at age 6, and Rose at age 9. Often their words revealed ambivalence about special education services, both in terms of the quality of the services they received and because receiving services required them to risk disclosure, stigma, and shame. As John

said, "Receiving the service wasn't bad, as long as nobody knew."

Jay: The first help came ... in the classroom. I had to use what they called an abacus. I enjoyed that even though I felt different with that [abacus] beside me.

I remember even when I was in the resource room, you know, not wanting people to see me ... because I felt stupid. Although I had good teachers in the resource room and I probably had services I wouldn't [otherwise] receive. You're still, you're still different. ... I remember ... twins that lived in my neighborhood. ... were calling me "flunker" and stuff. ... And I remember how bad that hurt.

It's kind of a twofold thing. I remember when I walked in that special education room, it was at times very comforting ... a very loving and caring teacher really understood me.... I didn't know why they [special education teachers] seemed to try hard to teach me. At the same time ... when I left the room I was scared the people were seeing me ... I remember having mixed emotions about that because I remember I loved being in there, I was successful in there ... but I also remember when I came out . . . who was looking at me.

I was pulled out ... then put back in. It was kind of weird ... I don't know if that was Chapter 1 or what it was. I had a remedial class and I also had special education classes for LD.... The teacher would tell me I needed to go a lot of times. That was hard, too: being told to leave, you know. But the other teachers would let me stay if I wanted to and they tried to help me and I liked that....

Middle school was better.... I had a lot of support at home. I think ... the [strategies] they were working with me on in elementary [school] were paying off ... I had some very caring teachers... some of them were special ed. teachers,

and there were a few regular teachers.

John: In elementary there was not as much [in the way of services]. In sixth grade I remember getting a tutor to kind of help and being pulled out [for] content matter and for reading. [I received] a tutoringtype thing in junior high and high school. In middle school . . . [I went to] a classroom ... for the math and reading. . . . After that [I] went specifically for reading maybe 2 hours a day. The services as far as middle school were really good. In high school there didn't seem to be as many services ... as we have now, [but] it was good quality, on the other hand.... [For example], all of the books were already highlighted. Those things were already done, and there were supports there for tutoring. . . . [But] I didn't get prepared in special education class enough to move on to college. . . . [We had] more packet work and help and attention for reading.

Rose: Whenever I had trouble with a class they immediately took me out of there and stuck me in resource—in a room called the resource room—and I was in there, like, during social studies. I was in there during English, too.

Whenever ... they took me out and put me in resource, we didn't do anything about the class [I was missing]. We didn't learn about social studies in resource; we played games. All we did was play games. [We] played computer games... [We] played board games ... I would come home with all sorts of toys and cassette tapes from winning stuff from games ... but I felt stupid because I had to leave the [general education] class.

I don't remember receiving that many services in middle school. I did have someone coming to check on me... and that was pretty much as it went. You know, that was it.

[In] high school they did it again ... as it got harder they

started to notice that I was having more and more problems, so I guess in high school they decided they were going to start again and they kept pulling me out and putting me in resource again.... They would take me out of the class that I was having trouble with and put me in resource . . . I was moved around in English—I was moved a lot of times. [In resource] we pretty much could do whatever we wanted to do. After awhile they would say, "Okay let's try again." So, they stick me back in another English class and they would [eventually] pull me back in.

As these reflections illustrate, during the time participants received special education services, they were pushed and pulled both physically and emotionally. These accounts reveal a tension regarding the services participants received. None of the three credited the pull-out services with being particularly efficacious for increasing their academic achievement; however, there were some positive statements about special education. Jay reported that he did better in middle school and attributed this to the strategies and skills he had worked on in elementary school. He also reported feeling successful in the resource room, although he stated that he got more out of the regular classroom. John talked about receiving some tutoring and help in certain subjects but noted that the services did not prepare him for college.

Rose was the most negative about the services she received. She stated that if she was having trouble in a subject, she was immediately pulled out. Then, after a period of time, she would be put back into the regular class. At one point during the interview she rated the quality of the services as "a zero" and "nonexistent," because no one worked with her on skills to help her do better in the classes she was missing. Her perception was that in the resource room they only played games. Her narrative reveals a dizzy-

ing cycle of being repeatedly pulled in and out of the general class and, as a result, falling further and further behind.

Participants did not directly comment on self-concept; however, their statements about not wanting people to see them go to special education classes and feeling stupid or bad when they had to leave the general education classroom suggest an awareness and concern about social stigma. They told of being worried about how others would perceive them if they knew they were receiving special education services. Participants suggested that the remote physical location of the special education rooms (often set apart from the general education classrooms) contributed to their social isolation from their peers but, paradoxically, also protected them from being seen and taunted by other students. Participants were quick to suggest ways in which these kinds of experiences influenced their current teaching philosophies and practices. Jay explained; "I'm shaped by what I went through.... I can't help but be shaped." As a direct result of feeling stigmatized by pullout programs, all of the participants noted the benefits of inclusion; however, two were careful to qualify that by adding that inclusion must be "done right" (Jay) or "correctly" (Rose). Their comments reflect a degree of skepticism about whether schools and general education teachers will be willing to provide the accommodations, resources, and commitments required to make the ideal of inclusion a reality. Some of their comments about inclusion were as follows:

Rose: I think inclusion is really good. I think the kids need to experience being in the regular classes instead of being pulled out.... Inclusion is a great idea when it's done correctly.... I would have liked to have seen someone try to help me, you know, get through those classes instead of taking me out.

Jay: I don't want my kids to feel different like I did. That's why I'm for

inclusion.... I've been told that maybe next year we may do inclusion and I'm excited about that. And, I think that...I can still give these kids what they need in a "real" classroom and I would love to at least try.

John spoke most cautiously about inclusion. He said:

My feelings are that, I mean, it's good and bad. The good thing I see [about inclusion] is that it gives [students] the exposure that they need, but some kids . . . [are] just not ready for that. Because sometimes . . . it's not enough help, it's not enough assistance. . . . I [am] really concerned about them getting the help in the classroom when the regular education teacher . . . doesn't modify [instruction]. . . . We're trained to do that.

In summary, participants supported inclusion, but all agreed that for inclusion to work, all students must have access to the resources and services they need to be successful. They also stressed the importance of general education teachers' having access to support and training. The most optimistic of the three, Jay, believed that inclusion could potentially help *all* students have a more accessible and responsive education:

Inclusion is the best way. . . . I think that if we do inclusion right . . . and . . . put money into lowering class size, getting the aides or teachers or whatever the kids need. . . . It would help everybody.

Disempowering Expectations

Receiving special education services can be a double-edged sword for individuals identified as learning disabled: Identification is a prerequisite for receiving services, yet identification is potentially stigmatizing. The participants in our study indicated that they struggled in school and needed help.

They never implied that they wished they had not been identified or that they should not have received special education services; however, each indicated that the education he or she received as a special education student could have been better. Furthermore, all expressed concern about others finding out that they were receiving services.

Some researchers contend that there are positive outcomes of identifying and labeling students, including that scientific inquiry is fostered, knowledge is advanced, and communication is clearer among stakeholders. On a more personal level, however, labeling may lower expectations and provide reasons or excuses for failure (Mercer, 1997). Research indicates that when students are identified as having learning disabilities, teachers provide more rewards and fewer punishments, exhibit more pity and less anger toward that student, and have increased expectations of failure rather than success (Clark, 1997). Participants in this study spoke candidly about the negative impact of low expectations.

Jay: I remember the teacher had very low expectations for me and I didn't like that. I felt really angry toward the teacher... a couple of times I would purposely fail, you know, just to prove that she was right. You know, I don't know, I can't explain it ... [you would] think that I would want to do real well to prove that she was wrong or something.

I went to my second first-grade teacher [after repeating first grade] and I said ... "I want to write pictures now, I don't want to write the alphabet. So why don't you just give up on me and let me write these pictures." And I'm really glad she didn't let me do that. I'm glad that she said, "You've got to learn" ... She had high expectations for me and I always appreciated that.

In college ... the professors, I think, let me get away with a lot. I would read to them and stuff like

that, but I hated it.... I didn't want to ask somebody to, in front of everybody, write for me because I had done that in school and I was through with that.

John: [Teachers] really didn't set high expectations for me.... That's where I lost some of that confidence, academically especially. [Expectations were] either way up high—the teacher expected it to be this way—written this way. [The teacher would say,] "This is my expectation and this is the way you need to act when you are in this room." But, there were many teachers who were on the other end of the continuum.

Rose: To me it sounds like they gave up on me. [But] I had a [university] teacher [and she said] she had never seen anyone work so hard.... She said [that] I gave 200%.... I had a particular high school teacher that did expect a lot from me. We read a book that we ended up reading out loud together. She knew I had trouble reading so she kind of skipped over me when it came to reading out loud, because she didn't want to embarrass me.... Now I think back to it and I think she probably should have made me try anyway.

One participants' major critiques of special education was that other people lowered their expectations of them as a result. In fact, participants' discussions about how their educational experiences influenced their teaching practice always returned to having high expectations of their students. Participants spoke appreciatively of teachers or family members who had held consistently high expectations of them. And although they occasionally spoke of being motivated to prove wrong a person who had low expectations of them, they more often reported feeling discouraged, angry, and frustrated by those who expected so little of them. As the following excerpts

demonstrate, maintaining consistently high expectations was a central tenet of each participant's teaching philosophy. Furthermore, John, in refusing to be thought of as the exception to a stereotypical role, stated,

John: The interns that I work with now ... they're just, like, "Oh, wow, you've made it this far?" Well, [I ask them], "Why did you think I couldn't, is the question." I go on to say ... [that] you don't go in with that attitude ... [of] not setting those expectations for the kids.... And maybe for beginning teachers, [they need to learn that] building up self-esteem ... [involves setting up] a positive learning environment with high expectations.

Jay: I require more from my students than a lot of the special education teachers did from me.... I look at my kids that I have in special education as all possibly going to college, no matter what their disability.... I think of them with high expectations and I try to challenge them.... I really do, and if I ever feel that I am asking lower of them, vou know, I feel horrible, because I know what that feels like—to have low expectations and just be allowed to, you know, go through. . . . And I know that I have the most important job on earth. I do. And I want to see them be successful. I want to see them meet their goals.

Rose: I don't want [my students] to go through what I went through—the frustration. And I don't want them to have teachers that have low expectations of them. I want them to have someone that really knows that they can succeed if they have the right tools.

Although participants did not provide specific pedagogical strategies in response to our queries about how their past experiences in special education influenced their current teaching

practices, they did reveal that they structured their curriculum so that their students received the same exposure to content as general education students, but were accommodated with different teaching styles or other modifications to make the material more accessible. They aimed to keep their expectations high but to offer supports to students in reaching those expectations. Participants stressed the need to teach students strategies to help them be successful, to regard all students as intelligent and capable, and to prepare them for college.

Helping students to help themselves was another important tenet of their teaching practice—one that was directly related to their own experiences with individuals who helped too much. Participants' interview statements repeatedly stressed that although they received help from supportive parents and teachers, they always preferred to do things by themselves. Jay mentioned assistive technology (e. g., voice recognition software) as something that fostered independence because although these technological advances are far from perfected, they enable individuals with LD to not have to rely on others so much. Moreover, Jay credited technology with allowing his own writing voice to emerge: "I'm a good writer ... I'm very creative ... [but] nobody else could read [my papers] but me." Rose also mentioned using a computer as a way to accommodate her learning disability in her teaching. It is interesting to note that although participants viewed technology as a tool for fostering independence and accommodating differences, none of the participants mentioned using technology with their students.

Participants did not elaborate on any concrete teaching approaches but, rather, stressed more intangible ways in which they used their own experiences and knowledge to motivate students to succeed. For example, when faced with students who were frustrated, rather than lowering expectations, Jay said that he tried to motivate them to keep trying, and Rose re-

assured her students while teaching them strategies to help them succeed.

LD: From Deficit to Teaching Tool

In their early recollections, participants often described their LD as something that was "wrong" with them, something that made others expect less of them, and something that they tried to hide from others. As participants described their current teaching practices and interactions with students, their LD was more often described as a tool that helped them relate to their students. The third theme explores this progression participants described, from wanting to hide their LD to seeing the benefits of disclosure.

"Passing" refers to behaviors that are enlisted to help disguise a stigmatized aspect of identity (Barga, 1996). According to Goffman (1963), such behaviors are not unusual in people who are attempting to manage discrediting information. In a study by Barga (1996), students with LD used a variety of passing techniques, such as waiting for hallways to clear so that peers would not observe them leaving the special education class, hiding books used in special education, electing not to use accommodations, and not being truthful about their learning disability. Likewise, each participant in the present study mentioned some creative passing strategies:

Jay: I didn't want to be different. . . .

My aspiration was to ... be like everybody else. When I was a kid in elementary, all the kids started to read ... and I couldn't. I tried—I wanted to. We had a playhouse outside. Our neighborhood was in the woods, [in] a rural community. We had a little gang out there in the woods and they would write little notes [that] I couldn't read. And I didn't want to be different again ... so I said, I have to find a way ... I made a language of pictures. And I didn't tell them I couldn't read or

write, you know, because I didn't want to be different, but I told them, "There's a secret code that only we will know. Let's not write the regular way." I made this language with pictures.... I taught my friends, and we would always use it. And, I felt like I belonged as a person, [which is] such a good feeling.

John: You knew something was wrong with you, like a disease, but you didn't know why. Socially, I had no clue about making friends—[I] didn't have any. [I was] getting picked on all the time. I tried to be the teacher's pet as much as possible, which is a way to try to make up for what you're missing in other places.

At [name of college] friends couldn't tell [I had a disability]. They just didn't have a clue. I mean, it was covered up well.

Rose: No one really knew the resource room that was in the back of the building. And nobody ever saw you go back there—we were kind of hidden away.

[In high school] people would watch me, and I tried to be extra careful with things. I was more of a "Dear Abby" to everybody [so], you know, they didn't focus on the . . . schoolwork aspect.

[In college] I ... attempted to take notes sometimes. I must've looked like I was taking notes. They [other students] probably think that I was very serious ... they wouldn't know [about my] having the tape recorder there and ... not being able to keep up with notes.

Mirroring the adolescents interviewed by Reid and Button (1995), participants in this study expressed difficulty forming friendships in school due to the isolation and social stigma attached to receiving special education services. As students, participants in this study often tried to hide their LD

from others-by inventing secret pictorial languages, by playing the supportive "Dear Abby" or "teacher's pet" roles, or by hiding the fact that they couldn't read or write like their peers. As teachers, however, each made it a point to disclose their LD to their supervisors and to their students-often to motivate them. Participants demonstrated more of a willingness to disclose than did, for example, T. J., the teacher in Gerber's (1998) study, who expressed concern that colleagues, parents, or administrators would judge his initial performance on the basis of his learning disability. In both Gerber's study and this study, participants came to view their learning disability as a teaching tool rather than a deficit, and readily shared this information with students. T. J. and the participants in this study believed that they were more effective teachers because of their LD, in that they could relate to the kinds of experiences their students recounted. Often their desire to pursue teaching in the first place was grounded in an ethic of care and a desire to make a change—to prevent others from having to go through the silence, shame, and low expectations they had experienced.

Rose: [As a child] I knew that I was labeled . . . but I had to piece it together. [My] students can tell you directly. . . . They all know that I have a problem, too, and it helps me relate better to them. . . . I'm very honest with my kids. They ask me questions about [my LD], but I don't want them to know about the negative aspects. I want them to think about the positive . . . [and] ways to succeed.

John: [The students] can't say, "Well, I can't do it" because they know where I've been.... [I tell them], "If I can do it, I know you can do it." I feel like that's what I go in and do every day—to go in [and] pass it on to those kids. When you can relate and say, "I've been there and I understand that"... [it helps] those kids... they start trying harder.

Jay: I tell my story because I think they need to know.... I have kids that don't have the same disabilities that I do, but I know what it means to feel bad. I know what it means to be frustrated. . . . I can be very compassionate towards that person because I know what it means to be different. I know what it feels like to feel different. You know, I really have a sense of it, I feel, because of my own experience . . . I feel I am more effective simply because I was that kid sitting in that chair. I was the kid that was scared to leave the classroom because people would see me. I was the kid that couldn't read or write. . . . I mean I was the kid that was scrambling when it was his turn to read—to do anything but read. I was all those things. . . . I ask my kids to face the things they're scared of. And I'm facing things that I am scared of, too. Together we're facing things we're scared of-things we don't feel like we're going to be good at.

It is evident from these excerpts that as teachers, participants disclosed their LD out of an obligation they felt to break the kinds of silences they experienced as children, to motivate their students to succeed, and to validate students' feelings. Participants explained that their decision to disclose their LD was not made for self-serving or cathartic reasons but, rather, was made to help students gain from their experiences. All three participants believed that their learning disabilities made them more successful in the classroom, demonstrating a shift from considering their disability as a flaw to discovering that it was actually an asset in the classroom.

Discussion

In telling stories we do not simply describe our experiences to others; we also attempt to infuse those experiences with meaning. Stories that participants tell researchers, like the

stories that researchers tell about participants, are inherently rhetorical—we all tell our stories to convince others of our point of view, of our interpretation of our experiences. The qualitative researcher is an interpretive researcher because he or she goes beyond description to make sense of participants' subjective meanings and place them in a larger context, thereby constructing a merged story that is as much the creation of the participants as it is of the researcher. In this enterprise we do not simply report what participants tell us, but strive to make sense of what we hear by delving into gaps, silences, and the unsaid. Therefore, "narrative research . . . is not ethically neutral. Narratives have to be interpreted to become meaningful" (Widdershoven & Smits, 1996, p. 281). In this section of the article, we attempt to make sense of what we learned from talking with participants—realizing that ours is but one of many other stories that could be told.

One of our initial reflections about our interviews with participants was that all were very passionate about their teaching. Each of them talked at length about the importance of their role, their desire to help students achieve, and their commitment to making change. Although they found fault with the special education services they had received they did not reject special education, deciding instead to make changes in the system from within.

As a result of being able to reflect on the practice of special education both as students and as teachers, the participants developed perspectives that seemed to be more realistic than idealistic. Their perspectives on inclusion were good examples of this realism, because although they were supportive of inclusion as an ideal and as something they wished they could have had available to them, they understood the commitments (financial and attitudinal) that are necessary to make general education accessible to a wide range of learners. If individuals who have received pull-out and re-

source room services tell us that they support inclusion but doubt whether general education will truly welcome all learners, perhaps the issue is not whether students can be served in inclusive settings but, rather, how to disrupt the status quo of an established general education system. This is especially important to remember in light of the published position papers against indiscriminate full inclusion in general education classrooms, authored by professionals and advocacy groups for students with LD, such as the Council for Learning Disabilities, Division for Learning Disabilities of the Council for Exceptional Children, Learning Disability Association of America, and National Joint Council of Learning Disabilities (Heward, 1996). On the basis of our participants' views, we ask, Should the field focus on the problem of inclusive practice or on the problem of indiscriminant exclusion?

We were likewise interested in the participants' views on balancing providing help with fostering independence. Participants were quite clear that they believed that too much help was not helpful and fostered dependency and a loss of confidence in one's own abilities. Moreover, participants suggested that too much help communicated low expectations, which was named by participants as the most damaging effect of special education labels. Jay, in particular, talked about forming close relationships with his students who were "from poorly adjusted families." He said that he wished he could do more for themeven be their parent-and that they often biked over to his house. It was unclear to us, however, whether Jay, in adopting the role of alternative parent figure or mentor, was unwittingly fostering another sort of dependency.

It became clear to us, in analyzing the participants' narratives about their teaching, that maintaining high expectations was a cornerstone of their teaching philosophies. What was less clear was the specific methods, materials, or practices that participants used in their classes to foster independence and success. It may be that our questions need to be revised to focus more on specific teaching practices; or, perhaps participants were communicating that what they had to offer that was different from other teachers was not so much methodological or pedagogical, as it was attitudinal. Several specifics were mentioned; for example, Jay related teaching to multiple modalities and doing whatever it took (using drama, music, and visual cues) to help students learn concepts. Rose said that she focused on strategies to help students achieve success in the general education classroom but, again, did not elaborate on any particular strategy. John talked about having students brainstorm their own ideas about ways in which they could improve their per-

Jay acknowledged that his students did not all have the same kind of learning disability as he did, but that he nonetheless could relate to their struggles. In fact, we saw only one instance of a participant overgeneralizing or assuming that if a particular strategy worked for them it would work for their students: Rose mentioned that she used color overlays for reading and that manipulating the color on her computer screen was helpful to her, and she went on to say that she provides each of her students with his or her own color transparency for reading.

In addition to having high expectations of students, however, participants likewise had very high expectations of themselves. For example:

John: [Other] teachers say ... [that] I do too much, [but] I don't know when I have done enough.... [So I] do more. I'm not going to do it like [other people]. I'm going to do it better—differently and better. The quality will be better and definitely more.... Obviously, I won't lose my job, but it's a lot of energy wasted.

Rose: I work twice as hard as other teachers just to keep above water. I spend a lot of time doing extra stuff.

Jay: In many ways ... I'm a perfectionist, in that if I can't do it right, I don't want to do it at times. That is something I am working on—not being such a perfectionist.

It may be that these participants continue to experience the stigma of LD and manage that stigma by overdoing. In always overdoing, they counteract stereotypes and prove to others that they are capable and successful. Smith (1991) suggested that overcompetence is a common mechanism used by children and adults to deflect negative stereotypes about LD, but that it is still a mask, a passing technique. It is possible that demanding perfection of oneself, besides being exhausting, can be damaging to one's quality of life and overall life adjustment, in that it leaves little room for social contacts or activities that are not competitive (Ferri, in press; Gregg & Ferri, 1998). T. J., the teacher in Gerber's (1998) study, also spoke of how his diligence was often perceived negatively by others, who characterized him as "too serious" (p. 48). Participants in this study talked about perfectionism not as a virtue but, rather, as something to overcome because it wastes time and energy and because it can become a hindrance in relationships with peers.

The fact that participants could not think of anyone else who would qualify for the study suggests social isolation. Perhaps adults with LD are not seeking or obtaining teaching positions in special education, or perhaps those who are teaching do not readily disclose such information. In any case, each participant was the only person he or she knew who was teaching special education and had also received special education services. In that all three participants found that having LD was an asset in their teaching, colleges of education might consider

ways to recruit and support teachers with LD.

Conclusions

Much can be learned from listening to both sides of an issue. The participants for this study were uniquely positioned to be able to do just that: to speak from their dual roles of former receivers and current providers of special education services. If we were to apply their suggestions in reforming special education, what could we learn, and what as a result would we do differently or the same? Their dual perspective tells us of the importance of maintaining high expectations and the devastating effects of low expectations. They took a realistic stance toward inclusion-and maintained that for inclusion to work, adequate supports must be put into place to ensure that general education classrooms are accessible to students with LD. They also spoke of the benefits of shared experiences in motivating students to succeed. In focusing on attitudinal and experiential, rather than pedagogical, issues, participants communicated that what they bring to the classroom that is different from their non-learning disabled peers is mostly attitudinal.

Besides combating low expectations, teacher preparation programs must likewise be wary of attitudes that foster a "savior" mentality in special education teachers, who can come to believe that only they have the expertise or ability to give students with disabilities an appropriate education. This attitude can foster dependency in students with disabilities and alienate general education teachers, as well as promote deficit models of disability. Instead we must find ways to foster collective and creative ways to construct educational communities where all students are challenged and supported. Perhaps the reforms in special and general education should start with a simple idea: that to help students succeed, we must expect that they will succeed and then create educational environments in which teachers work together to remove barriers and to ensure that all students are given opportunities and skills that support their attainment of long-term success and growth.

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AUTHORS' NOTE

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NOTES

- See Levine and Nourse (1998) for an excellent review of longitudinal studies on individuals with LD. Please note that we do not make any distinctions between follow-up and follow-along studies in referring to outcome studies.
- 2. Vogel and Reder (1998), drawing on earlier work by Vogel (1996), attributed some of the more contradictory findings among foundational outcome studies conducted prior to the late 1980s as well as among more recent outcome studies to differences in methodology and criteria for identification of LD. They cite differences in how samples were drawn (volunteers or clinic samples) and how soon after graduation the data were collected as important variables to consider when interpreting outcome studies. Levine and Nourse (1998) also highlighted some of the methodological issues related to follow-up studies.
- 3. We borrow Bakhtin's concept of equally valid consciousness in order to relativize the authority traditionally given to the profes-

sional voice. Within Bakhtin's dialogism, "any attempt to impose one unitary monologic discourse as the 'Truth' is relativized by its dialogic contact with another social discourse, another view of the world . . . ensuring that meaning remains in process, unfinalizable" (Morris, 1994, pp. 73–74).

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