Students with Learning Disabilities in Education: Managing a Disability

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine factors that have contributed to the success of students with learning disabilities (LD) in schools and to explore how these students manage their disabilities from kindergarten through college. The study followed a qualitative research methodology consisting of reviewing academic records and conducting interviews and classroom observations over a 6-month period. The subjects were 9 students with learning disabilities enrolled in a public 4-year university. It was found that the students experienced labeling, stigmatization, and gatekeeping throughout their school years. Furthermore, the students employed a variety of positive and negative coping techniques in an effort to successfully manage their disabilities in school. Positive coping techniques included relying on benefactors, implementing self-improvement techniques, and utilizing particular strategies and management skills to assist with academics. Negative coping techniques were described as “passing” and created tension for the students. Students employed passing techniques to avoid disclosure of their disability and to make it through school. The results of this study have significant implications for school administrators and university educators who provide services for students with LD under current federal laws, and further underscore the need for such students to self-advocate.

Since the passage of Brown v. Board of Education in 1954, schools in the United States have incorporated a multitude of programs to assist disadvantaged students. The Vocational Rehabilitation Act, passed in 1973 by the federal government, emphasizes providing an equal education for students with disabilities at the postsecondary level (Scott, 1990). In 1975, Congress passed Public Law 94-142, which ensures a free and appropriate education for all children with disabilities in the United States. The Vocational Rehabilitation Act and P.L. 94-142 have direct implications for students with learning disabilities. Both laws mandate that these students receive supplemental services in educational settings. In terms of numbers, it is estimated that roughly 5% of the school-age population is considered to have learning disabilities (LD) (Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1990). Furthermore, the LD category is the most recent and prevalent exceptional condition in special education today. Since its inclusion, it has grown to serve the largest group of students receiving special education services. Ysseldyke and Algozzine (1990) noted that 1.9 million, or 47%, of the 4.4 million students who received services under P.L. 94-142 during the 1986-87 school year were identified as learning disabled. In higher education, the number of students with learning disabilities has increased from .3% in 1983 to 1.2% in 1987 (Higher Education and Adult Training for People with Handicaps [HEATH], 1992). HEATH estimates that there are 20,000 students with learning disabilities enrolled in postsecondary institutions nationwide. At the postsecondary level, students with learning disabilities constitute the largest population of students with disabilities receiving services on college campuses (Jarrow, 1987).

Clearly, the number of students with learning disabilities in all educational institutions is increasing. However, in spite of federal-initiated laws to assist them, these students continue to face multiple problems that make learning in the school environment difficult. Specifically, students with learning disabilities may have difficulty in reading, writing, and spelling, and with numerical concepts (Student Support Services, 1992). Students with learning disabilities are often easily distracted, may appear uncoordinated, and may have poor time-management skills. Additionally, they may demonstrate difficulty in understanding or following directions and often misinterpret social situations and/or other behaviors (V. Powell, personal communication, February 8, 1992; Student Advising and Learning Center, 1992). Perhaps the most significant statistic that highlights the difficulties students with learning disabilities face is their alarming 40% high school dropout rate, as opposed to a 25% dropout rate among their normally achieving peers (Lichtenstein, 1992). Studies con-
ducted by Levin, Zigmond, and Birch (1985) estimated the dropout rate for students with learning disabilities to be at 47%. According to Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Thurlow (1992), students with mild handicaps, such as learning disabilities, drop out of school more frequently than students with other handicaps. Indeed, research by Edgar (1987) and Zetlin and Hosseini (1989) indicates that young adults who are at the greatest risk of experiencing lifelong economic and social difficulties are those who were identified as disabled and who dropped out of high school. In sum, students with learning disabilities often face a host of problems that make the school environment difficult for them. Furthermore, students with learning disabilities represent a population that is at a high risk for dropping out of school and experiencing economic and social difficulties as members of society.

Definitions

For the purposes of this study, students with learning disabilities were defined as students diagnosed by a school psychologist or educational institution employing the federal government’s description and categorization of learning disabled students. Successful students with learning disabilities were defined as students who had graduated from high school and were currently completing a college degree. Utilizing purposeful sampling techniques (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992), the researcher sought two groups of successful students with learning disabilities. The first group, called “traditional students with learning disabilities,” consisted of 4 students who were identified as having one or more learning disabilities sometime during kindergarten through Grade 12. Kindergarten through Grade 12 is referred to as “formal school” throughout this study. The second group, called “nontraditional students with learning disabilities,” consisted of 5 students who were identified as having one or more learning disabilities at the higher education level.

This study took place at a medium-sized, 4-year state university, with an enrollment of approximately 9,000 students. To initiate the study, the researcher contacted the director of the learning disabilities clinic at the selected university and explained the study. With the assistance of the director, full-time traditional and nontraditional students with learning disabilities were identified. These students were first contacted via a letter that was mutually generated by the director and the researcher. Students who responded in a positive manner toward participating in the study were then contacted by the researcher and scheduled for an interview. The interview served as a screening process and allowed the researcher to explain the study to the students, discuss time commitments, explain participants’ rights in terms of confidentiality, and answer questions. Four traditional and 5 nontraditional students with learning disabilities were selected for the study: 1 female and 3 males in the group of traditional students with learning disabilities, and 3 females and 2 males in the group of nontraditional students with learning disabilities. All of the participants in the study were Caucasian. Selection was based on verbal response, willingness to participate in the study, and availability in terms of time commitment. The students ranged in age from 18 to 45 years, with the median age being 27.5 years, and they varied widely in their range of disabilities. Table 1 provides a profile of each student who participated in the study.

Through the use of qualitative research strategies (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), data were collected over a 6-month period. Data collection consisted of conducting semistructured, open-ended, taped interviews; completing classroom observations; reviewing academic files; and collecting other documents related to the study’s participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Interviews focused on exploring each student’s history and educational experiences during formal school through their present time in college.

Results

The students in this study experienced various forms of labeling, stigmatization, and gatekeeping that created barriers for them in education. These three types of experience were interrelated, and each shall be discussed.

Labeling

Clearly, the students in this study experienced various degrees of labeling. Labeling is defined as anything functioning as a means of identification or as a descriptive term, formal or informal. Goffman (1963) stated that when someone comes into our presence, we first label and categorize the individual based on his or her appearance, to size up social status and place the person in a category of social identity. Gallagher (1976) described label-
Labeling was used to gain others as "convenient shorthand" (p. 3) by which we obtain information and use such information to focus attention on a particular characteristic of that person.

In this study, students described labeling as a positive experience when it made sense out of their academic struggles and involved getting help. Two participants, Suzanne and Fay, stated that they knew they were not "dumb or retarded," but they did not know why they struggled in school as they did. Once she had been identified, Suzanne said, "things just fell into place. I knew the results of the tests were true." Labeling was also a positive experience when it led to getting help from the schools. Paul recalled the relief he felt when he was identified as having a learning disability: "It was actually more of a relief to get the help I needed. It was a place to start my homework."

Labeling was negative for the students when it created conditions of being set apart from peers or receiving differential treatment from others. This happened frequently when students were removed in a very public manner from their general classroom to receive special education assistance in another room of the building. Often, they were chastised by peers and teachers for being different—for not being able to pick up on concepts as quickly as their peers. Lisa believed that it stigmatizes students to pull them out of the general classroom to attend special classes. Hank was placed in special education programs throughout formal schooling. He perceived these programs as "not a group for smart people. It was for stupid people and the troublemakers." Nick felt "extradited" and removed from his peers when he was placed in special learning programs in school. He added that he "bought into" his label of "underachiever" for 12 years, and it has been difficult for him to consciously break his negative thought patterns. Fay noted that her school instilled "dummy groups," where "kids knew who was in each group and they stayed there forever." Labeling was also felt to be negative when the students were placed in special education rooms with students who had more prominent disabilities. Karen and Jim reported that they both were placed in resource rooms with students who had a wide range of severe emotional and behavioral problems, and this made them feel uncomfortable.

Conversely, Dan was labeled as "bright" in formal schools and this prevented him from obtaining services he needed. Professors at the college level also label Dan as bright, and he sometimes has difficulty convincing them that he needs accommodations to compensate for his learning disabilities on exams.

It is noteworthy to point out that all of the students in this study except Suzanne knew early on that something was different about them in terms of how they performed in school. They sensed something was different about their learning ability before they were ever identified as having a learning disability—usually in early grade school. This finding is significant because it implies that students define themselves in terms of "normalcy" at a very young age, based on school performance and how they measure up to their peers academically. School success appears to represent an early benchmark for students in terms of normalcy.

It was previously mentioned that Suzanne never suspected she had a learning disability, although she struggled in school. There are several reasons why this may have occurred. While growing up, Suzanne attended a small rural school, and she may have benefited from a lower teacher-to-student ratio and thus received more attention, in smaller classes. Further-

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Type of disability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Crop science</td>
<td>Language and writing deficits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Special education</td>
<td>Auditory processing deficits, visual discrimination problems with reversals and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>transpositions, and directionality difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Math deficits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Chemical engineering</td>
<td>Dyslexia, poor organizational skills, and concentration and writing deficits</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Mechanical engineering</td>
<td>Dyslexia, reading and spelling deficits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fay</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Special education</td>
<td>Math and reading deficits, short-term memory deficits, and poor spelling skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzanne</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Animal science</td>
<td>Reading comprehension deficits, poor recall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Zoology</td>
<td>Verbal and written communication deficits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hank</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Civil engineering</td>
<td>Poor reading comprehension, slow reading speed, poor memory and concentration, and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>poor spelling skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Profile of Traditional and Nontraditional Students with Learning Disabilities**
more, Suzanne admitted that she did not challenge herself academically in school. "Throughout high school, I didn't know I had [a learning disability] 'cause I didn't take classes hard enough to make myself think something was going on."

**Stigmatization**

Stigmatization is defined as receiving differential treatment based on others' perceptions. People develop stigma theories to explain and account for a labeled individual's inferiority, sometimes, for example, even rationalizing that the person represents a danger to society (Goffman, 1963). Gallagher (1976) posited that stigmatization ostensibly serves to preserve and maintain the status quo in society. Rowitz and Gunn (1984) noted that most problems relating to human beings are defined by society. They wrote, "Labels are socially defined and will reflect the values of the system of the majority society" (p. 149). Once labeled, a person enters a social category, usually unwillingly. Whatever label is attached to the category becomes attached to the person. If the label is negative, the person becomes a stigmatized human being and is treated by others according to the imposed label (Schafer & Olexa, 1971).

In the present study, stigmatization took on different forms, depending on the context. In formal schools, stigmatization was evident via name calling, accusations, and low academic expectations by peers and teachers alike. During first and second grade, Lisa's classmates would tell her she was stupid. "I hated those two grades!" she exclaimed. Paul recalled a time he asked his high school algebra teacher for help. She boomed, "I just explained that on the board!" The teacher continued her tirade by calling him "stupid" several times in front of the class, which deeply embarrassed Paul. Jim spoke of a high school teacher telling him to his face that he was "stupid and lazy." After being identified as having a learning disability, Karen said her high school math teacher fondly called her "D.D.," short for "Darling Dummy." He would smile at her and say, "Well, at least we know why you are so bad in math!"

Fay and Nick expressed that their learning disability planted doubt in the minds of their teachers, and they were often treated differently. During lectures, for example, teachers would single them out and ask them, "Did you get that, Nick?" or "Do you understand, Fay?" Fay adds, "Once you tell someone that you are learning disabled, they treat you a little differently by how they relate to you." Karen confirmed that friends and instructors would talk slower and louder to her, "as if I were deaf!"

At the college level, stigmatization became either self-imposed or forced on the students. To receive accommodations for their disabilities, such as extended time on exams or test readers, the students had to reveal their disability to their professors. Disclosure to a professor only occurred if the students knew for certain that they would struggle academically with the professor's particular class. If the students felt they could get by without accommodations in certain classes, they opted not to use them.

The most severe form of stigmatization occurred when a professor, chair, or department would attempt to counsel students toward another major or attempt to remove the students from their department. Hank was met with resistance by the engineering department upon entering the university. With a grade-point average below 3.0, three failed classes in math and chemistry, and the fact that it took him 4 years to complete a 2-year program at a junior college, Hank was discouraged by the chair of the chemical engineering department, who told Hank up front, "You can't make it here. The students are smart and you could never keep up with them." Hank changed his major to civil engineering, which he felt was a better fit with his previous employment background in construction.

Lisa recalled the first time she asked a professor in the engineering department if she could take an exam with accommodations. It was the first time she had heard of her learning disability. In her words, "he panicked." He feared she would misread labels of chemical elements during lab and cause problems for the engineering department. A meeting was held to have her removed from his class. Another meeting was held to have her removed from the department. She was labeled a "dangerous engineer" by another professor. He told her, "Why beat your head against the rocks? Do something that is easier." Lisa contended that some engineering professors are still trying to have her removed from their department.

Dan and Paul expressed that they did not feel stigmatized at the college level. This appears to be related to the degree to which their disability affects their major. At this point, Dan has been labeled as bright by his professors, and Paul has yet to take a class that challenges his math ability. In short, those students whose learning disabilities hindered their major experienced stigmatization; students whose learning disabilities did not affect their major did not experience it.

**Gatekeeping**

The process of "gatekeeping" emerged as a concept from this study. Gatekeeping is defined as a barrier process that serves to maintain the status quo of an organization. Gatekeepers can be individuals or institutions that act on behalf of preserving or maintaining quality control of a program or department. This was accomplished by either denying students with learning disabilities access to a particular college goal or permitting access but on conditional terms. There was a positive correlation observed between stigmatization and gatekeeping: If a student was stigmatized, the student was more likely to encounter gatekeepers. For example, the students whose learning disabilities were the
most prominent (e.g., Hank, Lisa, Fay) had experienced difficulty with professors or departments within their major. Powerful gatekeepers attempted to discourage particular students with learning disabilities from entering a program of study or attempted to have them removed from a particular department. Students whose disability was less visible or did not affect their major, or who could manage their disabilities by themselves (e.g., Dan, Nick, Paul) did not have gatekeepers.

**Coping and Passing**

Labeling, stigmatization, and gatekeeping had other implications for the students in terms of how they coped with their learning disabilities. These three experiences individually and collectively created expectations of them in others and set barriers for the students. To be successful in school, the students had to respond to these processes. Goffman (1963) wrote that stigmatized people often resort to techniques of “information control,” such as passing, in efforts to manage discrediting information. Indeed, the students in this study responded by developing coping and passing techniques. Coping techniques are behaviors or initiatives the student takes to assist in managing his or her disability. Passing techniques are particular behaviors a student engages in that help hide or pass off (disguise) the disability from others. Passing occurred in both academic and social contexts.

**Coping.** All 9 of the students in the study employed coping techniques to manage their learning disability in educational settings. Such techniques were varied and numerous, but two main types of coping emerged from the data: positive techniques and negative techniques.

Positive coping techniques assisted the student in managing his or her disability in a positive and beneficial manner. Positive techniques can be further divided into three subcategories: benefactors, self-improvement techniques, and study skills and management strategies.

**Benefactors.** Without exception, all students in the study identified and relied upon benefactors. Benefactors’ functions included providing emotional support and understanding, acting as a sounding board for personal problems, helping with homework, acting as an advocate on behalf of the student, or driving students to appointments. The most frequently cited benefactor by 5 of the 9 students was his or her own biological mother. Paul described his mother as a fierce advocate for him during high school. She was instrumental in getting him transferred into a different math class after the teacher humiliated Paul by calling him “stupid” several times, and she was instrumental in securing a tutor so Paul would not fall behind academically. In Paul’s own words, “She’s very protective of me.” Lisa’s and Jim’s mothers helped them through formal schooling in several ways. Lisa was removed from her second-grade classroom and transferred to another district at her mother’s insistence when, during a parent conference, the teacher verbalized that she believed Lisa was retarded and that the parents should not expect much from her academically. Throughout junior high and high school, Lisa’s mom would faithfully check her papers for misspelled words, and she took turns with Lisa in reading her text books out loud. She also actively sought help for Lisa’s disabilities at the high school level, although her pleas were ignored by school administrators. Jim’s mother would write his papers while he dictated his thoughts and words to her. Because his handwriting left much to be desired, Jim’s mother would also write his papers for him in her own handwriting. One high school teacher accepted all of Jim’s work handwritten by his mother.

Other benefactors included friends, teachers, tutors, and college personnel who worked with the students at the university’s learning disabilities clinic.

**Self-improvement techniques.** Students also employed particular techniques to help them realize their potential and increase academic success. Self-improvement techniques included taking extended breaks away from the demands of the college system; seeking and initiating help at the university level when needed; using positive affirmations for motivation; seeking situations that would be growth producing; and establishing advantageous seating in the classroom, usually within the first three rows.

Dan employed the most self-improvement techniques. Foremost, he recognized his struggles with communication and socializing (social situations have not always been easy for Dan). Because of his difficulty with communication, conversations with peers frequently erupted into verbal fights, and Dan began to notice that he was excluded from parties and other social gatherings. Thus, currently Dan deliberately spends time in bars to learn how to communicate more like his peers. He also purposely places himself in social situations in which he has to explain himself to others and use their terminology. Additionally, Dan plans to enroll in drawing and dance classes that he hopes will enhance his academic and social abilities. He also forces himself to do tasks with his left hand, which he believes will help him to utilize both sides of his brain more effectively. Finally, Dan has an established pattern whereby he takes “breaks” from the demands of school and the educational system in which he claims he doesn’t fit. For example, after graduating from high school, Dan managed an ice cream store and worked for a pizza delivery service in his hometown for a year before enrolling in a state college. After attending the state college for 2 years, Dan traveled to Texas with a friend and spent a year in Houston doing odd jobs and earning a massage therapist’s license. Dan claims he needs these breaks to revitalize him-
self because the traditional system of education drives him “crazy.” Fay and Nick also employ self-improvement techniques. Fay, who typically prefers to remain quietly on the outside of groups, occasionally places herself in situations in which she must perform in front of others. Such situations include reading a poem out loud or speaking in front of groups. After graduating from high school, Nick elected to attend a private institution for 2 years that is specifically designed to help students with learning disabilities transition from high school into college. Nick credits this school with making “an absolute difference” for him academically.

Study skills and management strategies. By far the most coping techniques employed by the students with learning disabilities fell under this category. Management strategies included using technology, such as computers; utilizing time-management skills; doing relaxation techniques before tests; taping classes; and maintaining a “Day-Runner” or personal calendar for classes, tests, and appointments. Study skills involved utilizing tutorial assistance, test readers, and reading specialists, and setting aside time each night to study.

The amount of time these students devoted to their studies was overwhelming. In addition to managing their class loads, which entailed attending classes, completing reading assignments, writing papers, and taking tests, they often spent time with reading or writing specialists or receiving tutorial assistance at the learning disabilities clinic. The amount of assistance needed by each student at the clinic varied, depending upon what academic demands were placed on the students each week. Students typically spent 3 to 5 hours a week receiving assistance at the clinic, but sometimes spent as much as 8 or more hours if necessary. Such services represented additional appointments that had to be squeezed into an already compact schedule. Fay, Hank, Lisa, and Suzanne received the most services from specialists and tutors. Interestingly enough, they also experienced the most difficulty with gatekeepers.

Negative Coping Techniques: Passing. Unlike positive coping techniques, negative ones carried with them consequences and results that did not benefit or help students; rather, such techniques had dire effects for them. Negative coping techniques fell under the category of passing. Students in this study passed for two reasons: They passed to avoid disclosure of their disability, and they passed to successfully make it through school. Six of the 9 students employed passing techniques of one kind or another. Passing served the main function of enabling the students to overcome academic and social barriers and fit in with the mainstream. However, most significantly, negative coping techniques created stress and tension for the students, as they could not be truthful about their disabilities or make others aware of their needs. The students had to continually adjust their lives in order to hide their disabilities from others.

Passing to avoid disclosure. All of the students in the study were selective in disclosing information about their disability to others; however, 6 deliberately employed passing techniques in which they attempted to hide their learning disabilities from others for fear of rejection and stigmatization. In turn, passing created stress for these students. It required careful planning and adjusting on their part, and none of the students felt positive about engaging in the process of passing. Passing occurred in formal schools, at the college level, and in social contexts. In formal schools, Karen intentionally waited for hallways to clear before changing to her next class so peers would not see her leaving the special education room. She would go to great lengths to hide the elementary primer books she carried around with her in high school. Fay would purposely miss the first word of a spelling bee, even if she knew how to spell it. “It was always best to miss the first word . . . and get out of [the spelling bee] right away. Some place along the line I knew I wasn’t going to get it.” At the college level, Nick and Suzanne would elect not to utilize accommodation services for some classes, as this would single them out and stigmatize them. The students also avoided situations in which their disability might be more pronounced or easily noticed. Fay continues to purposely remain on the outside of groups, where it is “less threatening” and where she does not have to be accountable for responses. Says Fay:

Sometimes it’s easier to just go with the group academically. To be in the center of the group means you have to be on your toes academically; to put your best foot forward. Well, what if your best foot forward is that you can’t read, or that you can only read words that you have memorized?

For those students who had reading deficits, reading in front of others often presented problems. For example, at restaurants, Lisa and Karen would covertly avoid reading from menus, as they typically found their layout to be a mixed jumble of confusion. They would resolve their inability to read a menu in one of two ways: They would either order a popular dish typically carried by restaurants, or solicit several opinions from someone else in the party and then choose an item the person had named.

In efforts to pass, some of the students avoid telling others the truth about their disabilities. Nick stated it best when he said, “The real challenge is, okay, how much do I care if people think I’m stupid?” Fay, while working at a learning disabilities information booth at a conference, refused to identify herself as having a learning disability. Suzanne, who relies heavily on friends to help her with some of her studies, avoids telling others about her special test arrangements and her learning problems.
Passing to make it through school. Students also passed in an effort to make it through the most difficult environment—school. If they were not able to successfully complete their schoolwork in a fashion similar to that of the other students in the class, they sought other ways to be successful academically.

Karen employed the most techniques in order to pass through school. From third grade until ninth grade, she relied heavily on friends to help her cheat. She purposely sat by the “smart” students to copy their work, and she manipulated friends in order to get answers on tests. She further described how she manipulated the system: She knew precisely at what point to excuse herself from the class to use the bathroom and thus avoid having to read out loud; she used humor and became the class clown in order to laugh off the tests she failed; and she made excuses about her work. Once, in second grade, Karen was required to make an oral presentation about a book she had read. Because she could not read well, she made up a book entirely and reported on it to the class. When pressed by the teacher about the existence of the book, Karen replied that she had read it at her uncle’s house and, as she lived in another state, it was not possible to retrieve it.

Lisa would start researching high school reports by visiting the children’s section of the local library, looking for books that were appropriate for her reading level. She would peruse materials and check out items that would help her form a foundation for understanding the topic. Because reading was so difficult for her, she frequently rented and watched Public Broadcast System (PBS) videotapes in an effort to gain more information. She also had her mom read books to her throughout junior high and high school. This was less time-consuming than attempting to read her schoolbooks herself.

Jim confessed that he was a “con artist” and bluffed his way through school. He would read the front and back covers of books and write a book report from that information. He would use his poor handwriting to his advantage when working with teachers. If a teacher questioned the spelling of a particular word in Jim’s paper, he would read the sentence and stop at the unknown word and wait. The teacher would invariably grow impatient and spell the word for Jim, and he would then “have it.” Jim also relied on his mom to help him through school. Teachers would accept papers from Jim that were handwritten by his mother, because his handwriting was so poor.

Nick stated that he has relied on his personality to help him get through school. He purposely sits in the front row to be noticed by instructors. Front rows help Nick take advantage of what he terms his “nonacademic skills” and help him “get in good” with the teacher in order to get higher grades. This very process was observed during a college classroom observation with Nick. He arrived late for class one day and had to sit in the back of the room. When class was over, most of the students hurried out the door, eager to start their Thanksgiving break. But not Nick. He meandered up to the front of the room and waited patiently for the students ahead of him to finish their questions with the professor. Once they were done, Nick struck up a conversation with the professor, asking about certain properties of elements, examining tubes of liquids the professor had brought to class, and interspersing his comments with his usual humor. The professor smiled back and seemed pleased that this young man was taking such an interest in his class. Nick admitted, too, that in addition to “shining up” to teachers, he intentionally lowers others’ expectations of him. “Setting expectations has a lot to do with a lot of learning disabled people I know. If people set their expectations lower, we can get by better. It’s unfortunate, but it gets you by.” Nick said teachers lowered their expectations of him through-out formal school by requiring shorter assignments and, in general, expecting less of him.

Those who do not pass. Three of the 9 students do not employ passing techniques. Dan and Paul are similar in that their learning disability is not a severe hindrance to them in the classroom. In other words, they are less likely to be noticed as having any academic difficulties. As Dan noted, “I get labeled for being intelligent.” This labeling sets up all kinds of high expectations of Dan by others. Additionally, Dan employs many of the self-improvement techniques described earlier to assist him with his learning disability.

Paul’s learning disability presents problems for him only in math. So far in college, he has not had to take a math course, but he knows that when the time comes for math, he will rely on the university’s learning disabilities clinic for help. He also stated that if he goes into business for himself, he will hire someone to do the math-related work for him. Additionally, Paul noted that it is not unusual for people in general to have trouble with math; although he does not go out of his way to disclose his disability, he is not afraid to tell people he has a lot of problems with math because “a lot of people have problems with math.” Paul’s disability does not affect him socially.

In spite of having some of the most severe disabilities among the students studied, Hank does not pass—most likely because his disabilities are so severe that he cannot pass effectively. Hank is not willing to take the initiative with others, individually or in a small group; he fears that his thoughts and speech will be jumbled and he will not be able to communicate with others to any degree of success. Thus, Hank has become socially isolated by his disabilities; he is a loner and has no one to successfully “pass off” to. Hank’s disabilities have presented him with two limited options: Either he must isolate himself from others for fear of miscommunication,
or he must disclose his learning disabilities to others to survive academically. Once his disabilities become apparent to his peers, he is excluded by them. He stated, “It’s pretty hard to pretend that you can read when studying with other people.” Hank stressed the importance of studying in groups in engineering—or “you can’t survive. These people have to be my best friends.” Hank must rely on them for assistance and he is up front about his learning disability, as he cannot hide it from them in the academic realm.

Summary

Labeling, stigmatization, and gatekeeping were common experiences in formal schools and college among the students with learning disabilities in this study. Labeling, stigmatization, and gatekeeping led the students to believe that they did not fit in academically with their peers. As a result, the students employed multiple coping techniques in an effort to successfully manage their disabilities in school. Coping techniques were viewed as either positive or negative, depending on the outcome they provided for the student and the feelings associated with them. Positive coping techniques consisted of relying on benefactors, implementing self-improvement techniques, and utilizing management strategies to assist with academics.

Negative coping techniques were described as passing. Students passed to avoid disclosure of their disability and to make it through school. Passing was deemed to be negative, for two reasons. First, it was not seen to be in the best interests of the student, academically or socially. Their needs often went unmet on account of passing. Second, passing led the students to avoid disclosing their disability (mostly out of fear of stigmatization), which in turn created tension. Students employed passing techniques in formal schools, college, and social situations. Passing techniques were used by 6 of the students to hide their disabilities from others. Three students did not employ passing techniques, due to various aspects related to the level of their disability.

Discussion

The results of this study have several implications for teachers and administrators in formal schools and universities. Ultimately, this study raises the following question: Are schools effectively educating all students? In this study, the students with learning disabilities had experienced barriers throughout their educational histories. To manage those barriers and succeed in the academic arena, the students developed a variety of coping techniques. That the students had to do so suggests that schools fall short of meeting the academic needs of such students, in spite of their best efforts and in spite of requirements by federal laws. Some of these coping techniques carried long-term negative implications for the students. Certainly more research is needed to further explore how schools can better provide for the academic needs of certain populations of students.

Throughout this study, students expressed concerns regarding a lack of awareness about learning disabilities on the part of educators. Repeatedly, the students in this study verbalized the need for school personnel in formal schools and colleges to become better acquainted with learning disabilities and the issues that surround them. They stressed the need for more training of teachers, professors, administrators, and other school personnel. The students believed that through such training and awareness, educators could become more sensitive to the needs of students with learning disabilities and be better able to serve them without stigmatizing and alienating them. Case (1992) confirmed that research has led to better instruction since P.L. 94-142, but noted that few schools have trained their staffs to deal effectively with issues related to students with disabilities.

Similarly, educators must recognize that students bring different learning styles and strengths to the classroom; that is, not every student learns in the same manner (Gardner, 1985; Grinder, 1989; Schwarz, 1992). Educators must become more accepting of learning differences, be more willing to make accommodations, and be able to teach to a wider range of students (Lieberman, 1992). Furthermore, statistics indicate that the United States is experiencing an increase of students with disabilities and at-risk students in formal schools and colleges (Gradon, 1992; Lopez & Clyde-Snyder, 1983). Fuchs and Reklis (1992) confirmed that nearly 20% of children between the ages of 3 and 17 have one or more developmental, learning, or behavioral disorders. Needless to say, schools must focus on being able to more effectively educate a wide range of students if such students are expected to become contributing members of society.

The results of this study also underscore the value of continuing research in the area of learning disabilities. Specifically, more research is needed to clearly define learning disabilities as well as better methods of identifying students with LD. Eight of the 9 students indicated they knew someone in the same manner (Gardner, 1985; Grinder, 1989; Schwarz, 1992). Educators must focus on being able to more effectively educate a wide range of students (Lieberman, 1992). Furthermore, statistics indicate that the United States is experiencing an increase of students with disabilities and at-risk students in formal schools and colleges (Gradon, 1992; Lopez & Clyde-Snyder, 1983). Fuchs and Reklis (1992) confirmed that nearly 20% of children between the ages of 3 and 17 have one or more developmental, learning, or behavioral disorders. Needless to say, schools must focus on being able to more effectively educate a wide range of students if such students are expected to become contributing members of society.

Last, students with LD must learn to become their own best advocates. Ward (1988) described this as self-determination—the ability to assume responsibility for one’s own goals, accomplishments, and setbacks. Students in this study felt that schools rarely reached out to assist them with
their disabilities. Hence, the students developed relationships with benefactors and utilized other techniques to cope with the demands of school. Although assistance for students with learning disabilities is mandated by law, it is in these students' best interests to be willing to seek assistance on their own as well.

In conclusion, students with learning disabilities represent a population rich in skills and resources. When schools treat such students differently, those schools become negligent, for not holistically tapping into the full potential of such individuals. Educators must strive to ensure that all students line up on an equal playing field in terms of education and opportunities.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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