The Workplace Experiences of Educators with Disabilities: Insights for School Leaders

Barbara L. Brock

"The difficulties of the disabled have a lot more to do with a culture that values winning and normality and places little value on...the wonders of diversity."[1]

Educators with disabilities are a silent and often invisible minority about whom little is known. School leaders have gathered little input regarding the workplace experiences or level of satisfaction of personnel with disabilities. Researchers have focused on students with disabilities in teacher preparation programs, but few have investigated the workplace issues of the adults who work in school organizations. In fact, a review of literature on the topic revealed only one book, *Enhancing Diversity: Educators with Disabilities*.[2] This lack of knowledge and research is both surprising and concerning since the number of educators with disabilities is growing and will likely continue to grow.[3] The absence of statistics on the number of educators with disabilities[4] and the limited literature on the use of affirmative action to redress historical inequities[5] may suggest a lack of interest on the part of researchers and school leaders in the collective needs of educators with disabilities or their potential to contribute. On the other hand, confidentiality issues and the reluctance of individuals to disclose disabilities may inhibit data-collecting efforts.

The school as a social organization establishes the workplace conditions that either promote or diminish personal and professional development of its members. Maintaining educational environments that are supportive and inclusive of all personnel has been identified as a prerequisite to school success.[6] Furthermore, it is the law under the federal American with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA)[7] and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1993,[8] which mandate equal employment practices for individuals with disabilities. Although a vast body of research exists on schools' working conditions, experiences specific to educators with disabilities have not been included. The need for additional research prompted the author to investigate the experiences of educators with disabilities in a variety of education settings in hopes of providing insights to school leaders who hire and supervise educational employees.

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Background of the Study

What constitutes a disability? According to the ADA, a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more life activities or a person who has a record of such impairments is considered to have a disability. The nature of what is considered a disability has shifted as medical advances have occurred. Survival needs and the cultural standards by which a group of people measure themselves determine their perception of normalcy. For instance, in preliterate, agrarian times, diseases and impairments of the eyes, ears, and teeth, easily correctable today, were considered disabilities. In this sense, disability is by definition, a social construct based on societal norms rather than a medical diagnosis, and today's disabilities are those medical conditions for which we have not yet discovered a cure.[9]

Before 1970, the inability to function in one's career was blamed solely on individual limitation. During the 1970s, this notion was challenged by a sociopolitical definition, one that required alteration in the social environment as well as improvement in the functioning of the person. New policies and laws acknowledged that discriminatory factors rather than within-person factors were the primary problem of people with disabilities.[10]

In 1990, the ADA was passed by the U.S. Congress to ensure nondiscrimination and employment rights for people with disabilities. The act affirmed that discrimination rather than physical impairment was the primary factor that impeded people with disabilities from full involvement in society. Employers were required to remove architectural barriers; modify rules, policies, and procedures; and provide auxiliary aids for employees with disabilities.[11] Although the ADA was a giant step forward, the overall employment rate of people with disabilities has grown only slightly. According to Hernandez, Keys, Balcazsr, and Drum, two underlying obstacles have contributed to slow progress.[12] First, success of the ADA is largely dependent on public attitudes toward the law, and societal attitudes are resistant to change. The medical model of disability as something that needs to be "fixed" is solidly entrenched in societal thinking and not likely to be changed through legislation alone. Second, the vaguely worded requirements of the ADA invite confusion and enable employers to cite financial burden as reasons for minimal compliance or no compliance at all. Although employers are required to make reasonable accommodations to eliminate employment barriers, what constitutes "reasonableness" is confusing and arbitrary. In some instances, the law's complexity may have worsened employment opportunities due to employers' fears of incurring costs related to providing accommodations.[13]

Methods

This study sought to describe the workplace experiences of educators with disabilities in their own words. The author has experience in the field of education as a teacher and administrator at the K-12 and college levels. The study evolved from personal experiences as both an educator and an educator with a disability. Although the researcher's disability posed the potential for bias, it also provided an advantage in establishing rapport, trust, openness, and honesty among study participants.

The participants in the study were educators employed in a wide range of educational institutions, each of whom had one or more disabling illnesses that, for eight of the ten respondents, manifested itself midcareer. A list of prospective participants was developed though

suggestions from the author's colleagues, a method referred to as a reputational technique. Participants were selected based on their geographic proximity to facilitate the conducting of personal interviews. All of the participants lived in one of four Midwestern states– Iowa, Illinois, Nebraska, or South Dakota. Of the 12 participants, ten completed either a two to three hour personal interviews or provided written responses to the interview questions. Nonrespondents cited the time necessary for participation as their reason for declining. All respondents were career educators: two elementary principals; one elementary teacher; two high school teachers; four college professors; and one college administrator. The purposive sampling procedures and the small number of participants across four Midwestern states limited the generalizability of the study. Additional participants from a broader geographic area might have further illustrated the identified themes and revealed others.

Ten interview questions were developed by the author based on a review of the literature and included items on social treatment, architectural barriers, workplace accommodations, revelation of disability, productivity, and career mobility. (See Appendix.) Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, and then reviewed for accuracy by participants. Written responses and interview transcriptions were coded for content and analyzed for themes. Utilization of the qualitative methodology of member checks, coding, and reviewing data for verification enhanced the validity and reliability of the data.[14]

Findings

Respondents reported gender, marital status, age, disability, educational level, career field, and current work status. Of the 10 participants, 3 were male, 7 were female; all were in their 40s and 50s, and all were Caucasian. Nine of 10 participants were married. Only one participant had children living at home. All participants had one or more of the following disabling illnesses: post-polio syndrome, rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis, cancer, spinal stenosis, bronchiectisis, fibromyalgia, and coronary artery disease. Except for the two participants with post-polio syndrome, all the respondents reported that their disabilities emerged after they had started their professional careers. Their disabilities varied in terms of severity and visibility. Two participants used wheelchairs all of the time, and two participants occasionally used a cane or wheelchair. Seven of the participants had masters' degrees in education; one had two masters' degrees; and two had doctorates. Eight of the participants were working full-time in their career field, but two participants had recently left positions due to health-related issues.

The following themes emerged from the study;
• Disabilities often were viewed as a source of social discrimination;
• Architectural barriers frequently presented obstacles;
• Accommodations were minimal;
• Invisible disabilities were usually concealed;
• Disabilities prompted overwork;
• Disabilities limited career mobility in some cases.

No differences were noted between responses from educators in elementary and secondary schools and those employed in college settings. Differences in responses were noted between respondents with visible and invisible disabilities.

Social Discrimination

Seven of the ten respondents reported incidences of disability-related social discrimination in their workplace. Their responses revealed lingering traces of the historical stigma of disability, or as one college instructor stated: "I think discrimination in the form of social stigma exists for individuals with disabilities– a recognition that they are damaged goods." One principal observed: "People treat you differently [when you have a disability], plus they constantly ask how you are." A college instructor commented:

I once had a student from a culture in which you do not see people with disabilities in public or ignored them when you did. She believed that my appearance would distract her so much that she withdrew from the course. [On another occasion] I was waiting for an elevator...when a young mother stepped up to wait with her two small children. When the elevator came, I entered, but she expressed a desire to wait for it to return. I sensed she was concerned about what disease it was that put me in the wheelchair.

A high school teacher reported: "I used to be included in my coworkers' activities, but when my disability worsened and I started using a cane, they stopped inviting me. They don't say so, but I know it's because I walk slowly, tire quickly, and slow them down." An elementary teacher observed: "Although there are fewer barriers today than in the past, social barriers remain. Prejudice takes time to overcome. It may not be right, but it's a fact."

Three of the teachers in the study reported that they were not treated differently due to their disability. For instance, a secondary teacher shared: "No one discriminates. In fact, they assume that, unless I let them know otherwise, that I'm up to the task at hand. People do offer to carry things though if I look overloaded." An elementary teacher reported: "I shared all the jobs that others teachers had plus a few more."

Architectural Barriers

Six of the respondents reported that architectural barriers, such as doors, stairs, curbs, and uneven terrain made work difficult and inhibited full participation. A principal pointed out the need for improvement: "I believe people need to be sensitive to people with disabilities. Handicap parking should be used only by those with parking permits. Elevators should be accessible and restrooms with appropriate handicap facilities should be in all buildings." A college professor described an encounter with a "handicap accessible" building:

I broke my ankle the first week of school. Overnight I became doubly disabled, rheumatoid arthritis plus a broken ankle. Since I was able to drive and the building where I worked was designated handicap accessible, I assumed that I could handle the situation. I parked in a handicap parking place in front of the building and hobbled to the door on my crutches. However, the door was not electronic, and I was forced to wait helplessly for a passerby to assist me. I learned the hard way what "handicap accessible" doesn't mean.

An elementary teacher remarked: "Ever try to open a restroom door from a wheelchair? [Being in] a wheelchair restricted my mobility and participation."

A college professor echoed the sentiment, stating: "The lack of ramps and elevators restricted my participation." Another college instructor observed:

At one time I complained about the lack of handicap parking;

they added more, and they're still filled. Our environment has lots of buildings, many built during the early part of the 20th century, plus ice and snow, so that, by its nature, it's problematic for some disabilities. However, there's more that we can do. Although most of the buildings meet the minimum standards for disability accommodation, there's a big difference between "meeting accommodation standards" and "convenient." The letter, rather than the spirit of the law, prevails with cost being used as an excuse, making many of the buildings ungodly inconvenient for individuals with disabilities. We need to readjust some priorities.

A high school teacher exclaimed: "Discrimination does exist in the form of physical barriers! The 'barrier' is contingent upon the disability. For me, it has been lack of ramps and elevators in previous workplaces. Fortunately, my present school is barrier free."

Minimal Accommodations

Respondents' satisfaction regarding accommodations was mixed, somewhat similar to the findings reported in a study by Karp and Keller in 1998.[15] Although three of the respondents requested and were satisfied with accommodations, seven of the respondents reported that they avoided asking for accommodations. Several respondents chose to provide their own. One elementary principal said:

I made as few requests as possible. I knew the guy in purchasing so I had him get me a special chair. Otherwise, I bought what I needed and carried them with me. My husband made some things for me, and we'd go over to school on weekends and do things I couldn't do during the week by myself. I covered the glass on my door so I could lie down and rest when I had pain.

A college professor explained:

I have basically learned to work around special needs. I rarely write on the black/white board. Most of the A/V equipment is installed in such a way that it is extremely difficult to use from a wheelchair. On days that I am able to get out of my chair, I need a lecture stool, so I requested that one be placed in my classroom. I received multi-page forms from administration that were such a hassle that I went out and purchased my own stool and drug it to class with me. Generally, if you can find a way to work around the situation, it's probably easier to do it. A simple fact of life with a disability is that often a request for help causes more problems than you started with.

A second college professor stated similar concerns:

I ask for classrooms that accommodate my disability, but it often remains a problem. Just because the building meets the legal requirements of handicap accessible, namely one handicap accessible entrance and an elevator, doesn't mean it is functionally accessible for a disabled person. Plus there's the issue of the distance from the handicap parking place to the building, and to the one accessible building door, and elevator. If the weather is bad and the sidewalks not shoveled or icy, the problem magnifies.

Finally, a college administrator suggested: "As an administrator, I was able to make the accommodations I needed myself. My advice for others is to do whatever you can for yourself– quietly. Don't ask for anything."

Only three of the respondents reported satisfaction with accommodations. A high school teacher stated: "When I asked if I could teach five sections instead of six, substituting a study hall for the sixth section, and still be considered full time, my request was granted." A second high school teacher said: "I have breathing problems [in areas with] poor ventilation and [using] alcohol-based liquid dry erase markers. Chalkboards [were provided] to replace the dry erase boards. There was no help for the ventilation." A college instructor reported: "Other than a handicap parking permit, I don't require special accommodations. My hours are wonderful. I can accommodate an exercise program at home and work around it."

Concealing Disabilities

Respondents in the study echoed Karp and Keller's findings that individuals experience conflicting feelings about revealing disabilities in work-related situations.[16] All but one of the respondents with invisible disabilities reported that they concealed them during interviews, fearing that employment opportunities would be denied. Respondents who were diagnosed after employment concealed disabilities, fearing that they would be perceived as less competent. A teacher reported:

I didn't tell my potential boss about my disability during the interview. I wanted her to see me as a competent worker before she knew about my disability. I wanted colleagues to see me as a person before they saw me as a disease. I hid it from them until I needed to use a cane. I think they respected me more for not making a big deal of it.

Only one respondent, who had a visible disability, believed that openness and honesty about disabilities was the best policy although he did admit: "That's easy to say but hard to practice." Other respondents feared that if they revealed disabilities they would be considered less capable. A principal explained: "I don't try to hide it, but I don't advertise it either. However, sometimes I have trouble walking or my hands bother me. I can't hide that, but I don't make a point of discussing it." Another principal echoed these sentiments:

When people know you have a disability, they treat you differently plus they constantly ask how you are. I hide my disability because I didn't want people to think less of me; see me as less talented, less reliable. I really struggled with this issue– thought about it often. In fact, it drained me, worrying about how others perceived me. I'm sure job discrimination exists. Consequently, I was not willing to lay out to others the real truth about my disability. Employers know they have to make adjustments, but the whole show changes then.

A college instructor agreed:

There is no question that I mask the effects of my disability, especially things like pain and fatigue. When I did my rehab, the focus was doing regardless of the cost. A common theme was, you will never look normal but you must work as hard as it takes to do the job. No excuses. Consequently I make poor choices in the area of energy conservation. I worry what others will think if I wimp out– always a denied concern. There is no question that the invisible aspects of my disability, pain and fatigue, color my world and interactions with others.

An elementary teacher revealed:

When I was diagnosed, I didn't tell anyone, except my immediate supervisor. I was afraid that I would be treated differently, thought to be less capable. I never took time off work; instead worked in pain, probably to the detriment of my

health. I planned my schedule to avoid fatigue. Sometimes I lied or made excuses to cover my inability to handle something. My doctor wanted me to use a scooter, but that would have proclaimed to the world that I had a disabling illness. My supervisor didn't want people to know either. He told me not to use my handicap parking permit because it would raise questions, make people think less of me.

A high school teacher explained:

I hid it from all but my own department until I had to start using a cane. I hid it for two reasons. I hadn't told my boss about my illness in the job interview. I wanted him to see me as a competent worker before he knew about my disability. Second, I wanted him and my colleagues to see me as a person before they saw me as a disease. I think my boss and my colleagues respected me more for not making a big deal out of my condition.

A college administrator advised: "Unless you plan to quit, don't tell. I hid my illness the first and second reoccurrence, but, my position was too high profile to hide the third time. It was the right decision each time... Protect your privacy."

One respondent, whose illness unintentionally became public information, stated:

It was hard to hide an illness when you leave in the middle of work and a colleague drives you to the hospital for an emergency medical procedure, but given a choice, I wouldn't tell unless I needed some accommodations. It's personal– my business. Now people overaccommodate for me, even when I don't require it. It embarrasses me more than annoys me.

Only one respondent's advice offered a different viewpoint: "Be honest, give your totally best effort, and expect honest fair treatment in return. Do not be afraid to stand up for yourself or worry about what others might say or think. My workplace doesn't penalize me for restricted health. It has been a good choice."

Disability and Overwork

All of the respondents who reported a visible disability and some whose disability was invisible felt the need to prove their worth and productivity by working harder than their coworkers. For instance, an elementary teacher stated: "I wanted to be viewed as productive by my colleagues, so I always took more responsibilities than other teachers did." A college instructor said: "I feel as productive and sometimes more productive than my coworkers. I push myself to be the best that I can be. People who know my condition can't believe how well I do." An elementary principal agreed: "I worked harder because of my problem; I self-generated a lot of ideas and projects and was able to follow through because I surrounded myself with good staff. Others were amazed at all I got done; I am driven to an extreme sometimes."

A high school teacher explained:

When I required an accommodation because I couldn't perform a responsibility, I always volunteered for something else so I was doing my fair share. My new teaching assignment doesn't involve any extracurricular activities so I am less burdened than my colleagues. However, I am as productive as they are in the classroom. They know that I assign a lot of writing, and I carefully correct it; I think they admire my hard work.

A second high school teacher agreed: "I am as productive as my coworkers. I am a compassionate, proactive, caring teacher with a love for students and learning. Every day I'm at school, I'm devoted to my students and coworkers. People who work with me know the effort and attention I give to my work."

Limited Career Mobility

Although many of the respondents reported that their illness had limited attainment of their career goals, only three of them reported that forms of discrimination had hampered or limited their career advancement. A principal explained:

When I was an assistant principal applying for a principalship, I learned that my principal had informed the superintendent of schools that I had a disabling illness and would be unable to handle the demands of a principalship. When confronted, she told me it was her responsibility to look out for my welfare. It made me angry, as my work had never been affected by my illness. I was finally able to become a principal, but only after meeting with the superintendent to assure her that my disability would not affect my work performance.

An elementary teacher reported:

I applied to be a summer school principal in a building with one floor. I was offered a principal's job, but in a building that had two stories. Later, I applied to become a full-time principal, but other than summer school offers, didn't get there. I'm still a teacher and while I know there are other tasks I could do for the school district, they don't seem willing to take a chance on me.

A college instructor echoed these sentiments, stating: "I believe that my disability was a factor in denial of [at least one] full-time faculty position."

In summary, the majority of respondents had experienced social discrimination in their employment. For several respondents, physical barriers interfered with full participation in their work place. Many respondents avoided asking for needed accommodations; some even preferred providing (and paying for) their own accommodations rather than requesting them. Respondents with invisible disabilities generally chose to conceal them because they feared being treated differently and considered less talented and capable while respondents with visible disabilities believed it was better to be open. Most respondents felt compelled to work harder than nondisabled coworkers to prove their ability and worth. Some respondents perceived that their disability limited their career mobility and reported overt discrimination in their attempts at career advancement.

Recommendations

School leaders have opportunities to effect enormous change. They can eliminate discrimination, encourage inclusion, and create disability-friendly environments by promoting practices, such as:

• Actively recruiting, employing, and promoting qualified educators with disabilities;

• Including information on disability awareness as part of new personnel orientation;

• Making accommodations for disabilities available and easily accessible through established procedures;

• Modifying school buildings and campuses to make them functional and convenient for employees, students, and visitors with disabilities;

• Establishing committees composed of educators with disabilities to provide input and make recommendations on disability employment issues;

• Periodically assessing school culture and climate using an instrument that includes questions pertinent to the experiences of educators with disabilities;

• Establishing and disseminating a procedure for ADA compliance complaints.

Although the ADA legislates inclusion, leadership, not legislation, molds societal attitudes. Educational leaders can influence attitudinal change by creating disability-friendly schools and modeling inclusion for educators with disabilities.

Endnotes

[1] Quotation from an interview subject, a college instructor with a disability.

[2] Clayton Keller, Ronald Anderson, and Joan Karp, "Introduction," in *Enhancing Diversity: Educators with Disabilities*, ed. Ronald Anderson, Clayton Keller, and Joan Karp (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1998), 3-13.

[3] Shapiro (1994) notes that although exact statistics are absent, evidence suggests that due to medical advances that decrease infant mortality and lengthen life expectancy, the number of individuals with disabilities is growing. In fact, he asserts that people with disabilities may soon become the largest minority population in the United States. See, Joseph P. Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1994), 339.

[4] Keller et al., "Introduction."

[5] Eboni Zamani, "Revisiting Postsecondary Access and Inclusion for Diverse Populations: The Role of Affirmative Action and ADA in Providing Opportunity," Paper presented at the Oxford Round Table, St. Anthony's College, Oxford University, March 2002.

[6] Marie-Nathalie Beaudoin and Maureen Taylor, *Creating a Positive School Culture: How Principals and Teachers Can Solve Problems Together* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2004), 133.

[7] Americans with Disabilities Act, Pub.L. 101-336.

[8] Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Pub.L. 93-112, as amended by the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1974, Pub.L. 93-516.

[9] Nancy Mairs, *Waist High in the World* (MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 13.

[10] Lyn Joungbloed and Anne Crichton, "A New Definition of Disability: Implications for Rehabilitation Practice and Social Policy," *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy* 57 (February 1990): 32-38.

[11] Brigida Hernandez, Christopher Keys, Fabricio Balcazar, and Charles Drum, "Construction and Validation of the Disability Rights Attitude Scale: Assessing Attitudes Toward the American with Disabilities Act," *Rehabilitation Psychology* 43 (October 1998): 202-218.

[12] Ibid.

[13] "Advocates Say Law Hasn't Increased Disabled Hiring," *Disability Compliance for Higher Education* 10 (October 2004):3-4.

[14] Jack R. Franken and Norman E. Wallen, *How to Design and Evaluate Research in Education*, 3d ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1996); John Creswell, *Research Design: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994).

[15] Joan Karp and Clayton Keller, "Preparation and Employment Experiences of Educators with Disabilities," in *Enhancing Diversity: Educators with Disabilities*, 73-86.

[16] Ibid.

Appendix
Balancing Career and Disability: Survey/Interview Questions

1. Does your disability affect how you are treated at work? If so, how and by whom?

2. Do you try to hide your disability at work? If so, why or why not? In retrospect, did you make the right choice?

3. What advice do you have for other individuals about revealing a disability at work?

4. What advice, regarding concealing or revealing disabilities, do you have for individuals who are applying for employment?

5. Do you require accommodations at work? If so, what accommodations? Were they provided? How were you treated when you made the request? What advice do you have for others?

6. Do you feel as productive as your coworkers? Why or why not?

7. Do you think your coworkers perceive you as productive? Explain.

8. Has your disability had an impact on your career goals? If so, explain how.

9. Do you believe that discrimination in the form of social and architectural barriers exists for individuals with disabilities? Explain your reasons.

10. Have you ever experienced discrimination because of your disability? If so, describe the situation.