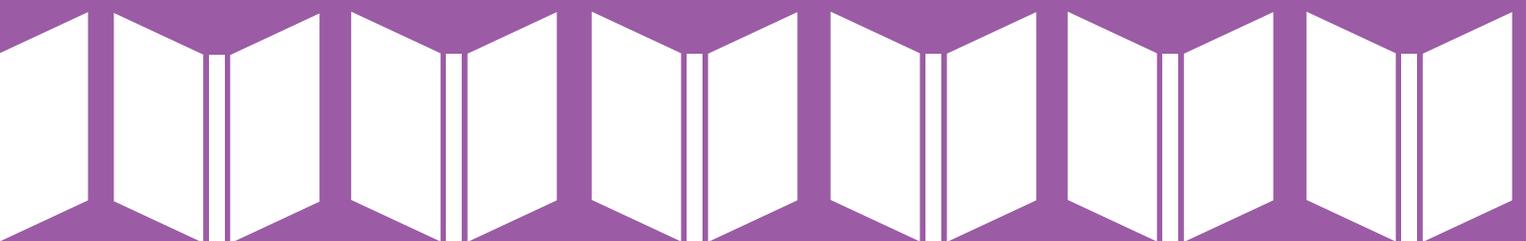


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# **educational considerations**

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# educational considerations

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# ***Inclusion Extended: Educators With Disabilities***

**Clayton E. Keller and Barbara L. Brock, Guest Editors**

Although historically the focus of disability-related research in education has centered on special education and the inclusion of students with disabilities, schools also employ teachers, administrators, and other educational personnel who have disabilities. How these educators fare in the workplace is of growing concern. If inclusion of students with disabilities in classrooms is a desirable goal, should not the idea be extended to adults with disabilities? Our response to this question is a resounding “Yes!”

In answer to that question, this special issue has two primary purposes. First is the updating of the published literature on educators with disabilities. The most recent efforts in this area date back almost 20 years to Anderson, Keller, and Karp's *Enhancing Diversity: Educators with Disabilities*, an edited book of scholarly chapters on the recruitment, preparation, employment, and retention of educators with disabilities that included the voices of educators with disabilities.<sup>1</sup> This issue represents the next generation of contributions to this literature. Second is the dissemination of information on educators with disabilities. Previous research literature rarely has been directed to educational administrators, those who play critical roles in either fostering opportunities or perpetuating barriers for educators with disabilities. Principals, supervisors, and superintendents will find particularly useful the research and information covered in this issue in three key areas: (1) experiences of educators with disabilities who work in P-12 schools; (2) improvements needed to accommodate educators with disabilities in these settings; and (3) available resources to assist schools and districts in creating accommodations.

This issue begins with Donald F. Uerling's article, “Federal Legal Protections for Educators with Disabilities,” which summarizes statutory and regulatory provisions relevant to educators with disabilities in the United States under two statutes: § 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973; and the Americans With Disabilities Act. Uerling provides important guidance for administrators about their roles and responsibilities in hiring, employing, and supporting educators with disabilities.

The next three articles highlight different aspects of the experiences of educators with disabilities. First is Barbara L. Brock's in-depth, qualitative study of 10 educators with disabling illnesses, “The Workplace Experiences of Educators with Disabilities: Insights for School Leaders,” which describes the thoughts, feelings, perspectives, and fears of disabled educators as they construct professional lives. Next, in “An Exploratory Analysis of Employment-Related Experiences of Educators with Learning Disabilities,” Susan A. Vogel, Christopher Murray, Carol Wren, and Pamela B. Adelman present quantitative and qualitative results from their continuing longitudinal research. In the third article of this group, “Adolescent Perceptions of Educators with Physical Challenges,” Marie Beattie focuses not on the experiences of teachers who have physical disabilities but also on the perceptions of secondary level students taught by them. In the final article, “Systems of Support: The Educators with Disabilities Caucus and Mentoring Program,” Polly G. Haselden, Pamela K. De Loach, Jennifer Miller, Monica Campbell, Lynn Boyer, and Nancy Anderson describe a recently developed resource for educators with disabilities. Their article presents the rationale for the program, the development of the caucus and the mentoring program, and lessons learned from the first three mentor-mentee pairs. This national program provides a model for schools and districts to address the needs of new educators with disabilities or experienced educators newly disabled.

In closing, we would like to mention two resources to assist schools, districts, and educators with disabilities. Both emanate from teachers' unions efforts to support members who have disabilities. The United Federation of Teachers Committee for Members Who Are Capably Disabled, located in New York City, provides information, support, and assistance with accommodation requests; holds regular meetings; and has links to a variety of informational resources on its web site.<sup>2</sup> The United Kingdom's National Union of Teachers (NUT) has done extensive work since 1999 in promoting disability equality policies for teachers with disabilities. Organizationally, these efforts are currently located within its Education and Equal Opportunities Department, this combining disabilities with other groups pursuing equal rights.<sup>3</sup> In addition, two NUT publications, although geared to British legal requirements, have much to offer to those in the United States: “Tool Bag for Supporting Disabled Teachers”<sup>4</sup> and “Our Right to Stay in Work! Making Reasonable Adjustments for Disabled Teachers.”<sup>5</sup>

Our hope is that the articles in this issue will initiate further discussions in the community of educational leaders about ways to foster opportunities for educators with disabilities to make our schools inclusive environments for all.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Ronald J. Anderson, Clayton E. Keller, and Joan M. Karp, ed., *Enhancing Diversity: Educators with Disabilities* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> United Federation of Teachers, “Capably Disabled Members,” <http://www.uft.org/member/other/capably>.

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication from Rosamund McNeil, Principal Officer for Gender and Disability Equality, Education and Equal Opportunities Department, National Union of Teachers, to Clayton Keller, February 27, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> National Union of Teachers, “Tool Bag for Supporting Disabled Teachers” (London, UK), <http://www.nut.org.uk/resources/pdf/toolbag.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Doug McIvor, “Our Right to Stay in Work!” (London, UK: National Union of Teachers), [http://www.nut.org.uk/resources/pdf/Our\\_rights\\_disabled.pdf](http://www.nut.org.uk/resources/pdf/Our_rights_disabled.pdf).

**Clayton Keller is Special Education Workforce Specialist for the Minnesota Low Incidence Projects at Metro Educational Cooperative Service Unit, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Barbara L. Brock is Associate Professor of Education at Creighton University.**

# Federal Legal Protections for Educators with Disabilities

Donald F. Uerling

Educators are generally aware that federal law protects persons with disabilities from unjustified discrimination, but they may not be familiar with the details of how these protections come into play when decisions are made about an individual's educational or employment opportunities. This article focuses on the protections that two federal statutes, § 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (hereafter referred to as § 504)<sup>1</sup> and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (hereafter referred to as ADA),<sup>2</sup> afford educators with disabilities, both in college and university training programs and before and after employment in elementary and secondary schools.

## Constitutional Protections

Before embarking on a discussion of the federal statutory protections, the limits of the constitutional protections should be noted. The primary source of federal constitutional protections against various forms of unjustified discrimination is the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The U.S. Supreme Court has made clear, however, that the protections it extends to persons with disabilities are rather minimal. For example, in *Cleburne v. Cleburne Living Center, Inc.*, the Court refused to apply "heightened scrutiny" to a zoning regulation that discriminated against group homes for those with mental disabilities, noting that the range of disabilities precluded the application of a single test.<sup>3</sup> The Court did, however, apply the less-demanding "rational basis test" and struck down this particular zoning regulation as not being rationally related to any legitimate public purpose. In *Board of Trustees of the University of Alabama, et al. v. Garrett*, the Court noted that the Fourteenth Amendment imposed no obligation on government entities to take affirmative steps on behalf of persons with disabilities who were seeking employment, so long as their actions towards such individuals were rational. Furthermore, the Court stated: "States could quite hard headedly – and perhaps hardheartedly – hold to job qualification requirements which do not make allowance for the disabled. If special accommodations for the disabled are to be required, they have to come from positive law and not through the Equal Protection Clause."<sup>4</sup>

## Federal Statutes

The primary sources of federal protections for educators with disabilities are found in § 504 and the ADA.<sup>5</sup> Congress enacted § 504 pursuant to its authority to regulate expenditures of federal funds and enacted the ADA pursuant to its authority to regulate interstate commerce and to implement the protections of the Fourteenth Amendment. Both statutes are accompanied by an extensive set of regulations promulgated by the agencies responsible for their

implementation and enforcement. Because the ADA generally follows the protections provided by § 504, an overview of § 504 and its accompanying regulations will serve to explain the general protections that the two federal statutes afford educators with disabilities. Also, because many of the protections under federal law are grounded in the federal regulations, a number of the more important provisions in the regulations accompanying § 504, which are followed generally by the regulations accompanying the ADA, are set out below.

### § 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973

The basic protection of § 504 provides that: "No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States, as defined in section 706(8) of this title, shall, solely by reason of her or his disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance..."<sup>6</sup> The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 also provides that: "...the term 'individual with a disability' means...any person who (i) has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more of such person's major life activities, (ii) has a record of such an impairment, or (iii) is regarded as having such an impairment."<sup>7</sup>

Many important definitions were not included in the legislation, but instead were promulgated in the Code of Federal Regulations. "Physical or mental impairment" and "major life activities" are defined as follows:

- (i) Physical or mental impairment means (A) any physiological disorder or condition, cosmetic disfigurement, or anatomical loss affecting one or more of the following body systems: neurological; musculoskeletal; special sense organs; respiratory, including speech organs; cardiovascular; reproductive, digestive, genito-urinary; hemic and lymphatic; skin; and endocrine; or (B) any mental or psychological disorder, such as mental retardation, organic brain syndrome, emotional or mental illness, and specific learning disabilities.
- (ii) Major life activities means functions such as caring for one's self, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, and working.
- (iii) Has a record of such an impairment means has a history of, or has been misclassified as having, a mental or physical impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities.
- (iv) Is regarded as having an impairment means (A) has a physical or mental impairment that does not substantially limit major life activities but that is treated by a recipient as constituting such a limitation; (B) has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits major life activities only as a result of the attitudes of others toward such impairment; or (C) has none of the impairments defined in paragraph (j)(2)(i) of this section but is treated by a recipient as having such an impairment.<sup>8</sup>

The regulations also define a "qualified" handicapped person.<sup>9</sup> With respect to employment, a "qualified" handicapped person is one... "who, with reasonable accommodation, can perform the essential functions of the job in questions..." while for postsecondary students and recipients of vocational education services, a "qualified" handicapped person is one "...who meets the academic and technical standards requisite to admission or participation in the recipient's education program or activity."<sup>10</sup>

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Donald F. Uerling is Associate Professor of Educational Administration at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

What must elementary and secondary school employers and postsecondary educational institutions do to avoid unlawful discrimination based on disabilities? The Code of Federal Regulations addresses these requirements. For postsecondary students, including those preparing to become educators, the accommodations are referred to as “academic adjustments,” as follows:

(a) Academic requirements. A recipient to which this subpart applies shall make such modifications to its academic requirements as are necessary to ensure that such requirements do not discriminate or have the effect of discriminating, on the basis of handicap, against a qualified handicapped applicant or student. Academic requirements that the recipient can demonstrate are essential to the instruction being pursued by such student or to any directly related licensing requirement will not be regarded as discriminatory within the meaning of this section. Modifications may include changes in the length of time permitted for the completion of degree requirements, substitution of specific courses required for the completion of degree requirements, and adaptation of the manner in which specific courses are conducted.<sup>11</sup>

For those who are either seeking employment or who currently are employed, the regulations use the more familiar terminology of “reasonable accommodation.” Further, they provide examples of accommodations that may be reasonable and set out factors used to determine if an accommodation would present an “undue hardship” for the employer as follows:

(a) A recipient shall make reasonable accommodation to the known physical or mental limitations of an otherwise qualified handicapped applicant or employee unless the recipient can demonstrate that the accommodation would impose an undue hardship on the operation of its program or activity.

(b) Reasonable accommodation may include:

(1) Making facilities used by employees readily accessible to and usable by handicapped persons, and

(2) Job restructuring, part-time or modified work schedules, acquisition or modification of equipment or devices, the provision of readers or interpreters, and other similar actions.

(c) In determining pursuant to paragraph (a) of this section whether an accommodation would impose an undue hardship on the operation of a recipient's program or activity, factors to be considered include:

(1) The overall size of the recipient's program or activity with respect to number of employees, number and type of facilities, and size of budget;

(2) The type of the recipient's operation, including the composition and structure of the recipient's workforce; and

(3) The nature and cost of the accommodation needed.

(d) A recipient may not deny any employment opportunity to a qualified handicapped employee or applicant if the basis for the denial is the need to make reasonable accommodation to the physical or mental limitations of the employee or applicant.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Americans with Disabilities Act*

The ADA extends the prohibitions of § 504 to covered entities that did not receive federal financial assistance. The ADA includes five titles, of which only the first three are pertinent to this discussion.<sup>13</sup>

Title I. Employment. Title I requires employers with 15 or more employees to provide qualified individuals with disabilities an equal opportunity to benefit from the full range of employment-related opportunities available to others. For example, it prohibits discrimination in recruitment, hiring, promotions, training, pay, social activities, and other privileges of employment. It restricts questions that can be asked about an applicant's disability before a job offer is made, and it requires that employers make reasonable accommodation to the known physical or mental limitations of otherwise qualified individuals with disabilities, unless it results in undue hardship. Religious entities with 15 or more employees are covered.<sup>14</sup>

Title II. Public Services. Title II covers all activities of state and local governments regardless of the government entity's size or receipt of federal funding, and it requires that state and local governments give people with disabilities an equal opportunity to benefit from all of their programs, services, and activities (e.g. public education, employment, transportation, recreation, health care, social services, courts, voting, and town meetings).<sup>15</sup>

Title III. Public Accommodations. Title III of the ADA covers businesses and nonprofit service providers that are public accommodations, privately operated entities offering certain types of courses and examinations, privately operated transportation, and commercial facilities. Public accommodations are private entities who own, lease, lease to, or operate facilities such as restaurants, retail stores, hotels, movie theaters, private schools, convention centers, doctors' offices, homeless shelters, transportation depots, zoos, funeral homes, day care centers, and recreation facilities including sports stadiums and fitness clubs. Transportation services provided by private entities are also covered.<sup>16</sup>

#### **Case Law**

Along with their accompanying regulations, § 504 and the ADA establish general rules. A review of pertinent case law provides insight into how these laws have been applied in specific situations.

#### *What Is a Disability?*

Not every “physical or mental impairment” is a “disability” for purposes of § 504 and the ADA. The U.S. Supreme Court has established some basic principles. In *School Board of Nassau County v. Arline*, the Court held that a person suffering from a contagious disease was a handicapped person within the protection of § 504.<sup>17</sup> Some years later, in *Bragdon v. Abbott*,<sup>18</sup> the Court held specifically that HIV/AIDS was a disability, bringing a person with asymptomatic HIV infection under the protection of the ADA.

The Court explained more precisely in several ADA cases what kind of an “impairment” constitutes an actual “disability.” In *Murphy v. United Parcel Service*<sup>19</sup> and *Sutton v. United Airlines*,<sup>20</sup> the Court held that under the ADA, the determination whether impairment substantially limits major life activities is properly made with reference to mitigating measures. In the first case, a truck driver with high blood pressure was not found disabled because with medication his hypertension did not significantly restrict his activities. In the second, twin sisters with severe myopia were not considered disabled because with eyeglasses they could pursue normal activities. However, in *Toyota Motor Manufacturing Kentucky, Inc. v. Williams*<sup>21</sup> the Court held that a person with bilateral carpal tunnel syndrome and bilateral tendonitis was impaired but not disabled under ADA. To satisfy the statutory definition of being substantially limited in performing

manual tasks, an individual must have an impairment that prevents or severely restricts the individual from doing activities that are of central importance to most people's daily lives, not just important to a narrow range of jobs. Also, the impairment's impact must also be permanent or long-term.

Two cases from U.S. courts of appeals illustrate how the issue of whether or not an individual is disabled for purposes of § 504 or the ADA has been resolved in education settings. First, *Wong v. Regents of the University of California* provides insight into the kind of mental impairment that does not bring a college or university student under the protections of the federal statutes.<sup>22</sup> Wong sued the University of California, alleging that the university discriminated against him in violation of § 504 and the ADA when it denied his request for learning disability accommodations and subsequently dismissed him for failure to meet the academic requirements of the medical school; that is, his ward performance was deemed unsatisfactory, and he received a failing grade. Wong contended that because of his disability he needed more time to prepare for his clinical clerkships. The district court granted the university's motion for summary judgment on the issue of whether Wong was "disabled," and the court of appeals affirmed.

The issue was whether a person who has achieved considerable academic success, beyond the attainment of most people, can nonetheless be found to be "substantially limited" in reading and learning and thus be entitled to claim the protections afforded under the Acts to a disabled person. The court of appeals held that he was not. The consideration of whether a given condition constitutes a disability involves three inquiries: (1) whether the condition is a physical or mental impairment; (2) whether the life activity as to which an individual alleges he or she is limited is a *major* life activity; and (3) whether the impairment *substantially limits* the identified major life activity. In this instance, Wong suffered from an impairment that limited his ability to process and communicate information. The limitations alleged by Wong involved major life activities of learning, reading, and working, but Wong's impairment did not *substantially limit* him in a major life activity. A student cannot successfully claim to be disabled based on being substantially limited in his ability to "learn" if he has not, in fact, been substantially limited, as that term is used in the Acts. The relevant question for determining whether Wong was "disabled" under the Acts is not whether he might be able to prove to a trier of fact that his learning impairment makes it impossible for him to keep up with a rigorous medical school curriculum. It is whether his impairment substantially limits his ability to learn as a whole, for purposes of daily living, as compared to most people.

On the other hand, *Peters v. Baldwin Union Free School District* illustrates an instance when an educator did in fact have a disability that brought her under the protections of § 504.<sup>23</sup> Peters sued the school district and various officials, alleging inter alia that they violated the Rehabilitation Act by terminating her employment as a guidance counselor because they perceived her to have a disability. At the close of plaintiff's case, the district court directed a verdict for the defendant, but the court of appeals overturned the verdict.

Peters had a history of serious medical problems. One night she described the pain she had experienced earlier that day to a fellow guidance counselor and joked that she could commit suicide with a gun belonging to her husband, who was a police officer. This comment was mentioned to the school psychologist who passed it on to the principal and superintendent. She was reassigned and finally dismissed. Peters contended that she came with the protection of the

Act because she was perceived by her employer as having a physical or mental impairment which substantially limited one or more of her major life activities. The evidence she submitted at trial was adequate to show that her employer perceived her as suffering from a mental illness that made her suicidal. For her employer's alleged perception to bring Peters under the protection of the Act, the condition she was perceived as having must be an "impairment" and an impairment that would "substantially limit" a major life activity.

The court of appeals found that she had presented sufficient evidence of a limitation relating to her ability to care for herself. The ability to care for oneself is a major life activity recognized under Act; it encompasses normal activities of daily living, including feeding oneself, driving, grooming, and cleaning one's home. A mental illness that impels one to suicide can be viewed as a paradigmatic instance of inability to care for oneself. It therefore constituted a protected disability under the Rehabilitation Act. Because the trial record raised unresolved factual issues as to why Peters was dismissed (poor performance or perceptions of disability), the court of appeals vacated and remanded.

#### *Who is Otherwise Qualified?*

Assuming that a person is indeed an "individual with a disability," the next question is whether or not that person is "otherwise qualified." The U.S. Supreme Court has addressed this issue in two cases arising in educational settings, the first involving an academic preparation program and the second involving a teacher's employment.

In *Southeastern Community College v. Davis*, the faculty of a nursing program denied admission to an applicant with a severe hearing disability.<sup>24</sup> Even with a hearing aid, it was necessary for her to rely on lip-reading to understand speech directed to her. The faculty determined that it would be impossible for her to participate in the normal clinical training program, and that the modification necessary to enable her to participate would prevent her from realizing the benefits of the program. She brought suit, alleging a violation of § 504. The district court concluded that she was not "otherwise qualified" because the disability would prevent her from functioning sufficiently in the program. The court of appeals disagreed, believing that the college must reconsider her application without regard to her hearing ability.

The Supreme Court reversed, holding that "[a]n otherwise qualified person is one who is able to meet all of a program's requirements in spite of the handicap."<sup>25</sup> Although the regulations applicable to postsecondary educational programs required covered institutions to make modifications in their programs to accommodate handicapped persons, the modifications required in this case would not have resulted in even a rough equivalent of the normal training in a nursing program. "Such a fundamental alteration in the nature of a program is far more than the 'modifications' the regulation requires."<sup>26</sup> The Court summarized by noting that situations may arise where an institution's refusal to modify an educational program might become unreasonable and discriminatory, but that "Section 504 imposes no requirement upon an education institution to lower or to effect substantial modifications of standards to accommodate a handicapped person."<sup>27</sup>

In an employment case noted above, *School Board of Nassau County v. Arline*, an elementary school teacher who was dismissed after suffering a third relapse of tuberculosis brought suit alleging that the board's decision to dismiss her because of her tuberculosis violated § 504.<sup>28</sup> After holding that a person with an infectious disease was a "handicapped individual" for purposes of § 504, the Court turned to the issue of whether such an individual is "otherwise qualified" to

teach elementary school. Because of the paucity of factual findings regarding that issue, the Court was unable to determine whether the teacher was “otherwise qualified” for her job. The case was remanded to the district court to resolve that issue, with the following guidance: “To answer this question in most cases, the district court will need to conduct an individualized inquiry and make appropriate findings of fact... The basic factors to be considered in conducting this inquiry are well established.”<sup>29</sup>

The Court also said:

In the employment context, an otherwise qualified person is one who can perform “the essential functions” of the job in question. When a handicapped person is not able to perform the essential functions of the job, the court must also consider whether any “reasonable accommodation” by the employer would enable the handicapped person to perform those functions. Accommodation is not reasonable if it either imposes “undue financial and administrative burdens” on [an employer] or requires “a fundamental alteration in the nature of [the] program.”<sup>30</sup>

In the context of the employment of a person with a contagious disease, this inquiry should include findings of fact, based on reasonable medical judgments, about (a) the nature of the risk (how the disease is transmitted); (b) the duration of the risk (how long is the carrier infectious); (c) the severity of the risk (what is the potential harm to third parties); and (d) the probabilities the disease will be transmitted and will cause varying degrees of harm.<sup>31</sup>

#### *What is a Reasonable Accommodation?*

Assuming that an individual has a disability for purposes of § 504 or the ADA, the question remains as to whether or not that person can perform the essential functions of the job, with or without reasonable accommodation. Two employment cases from educational settings are discussed below.

In a § 504 case, *Borkowski v. Valley Central School District*, a federal court of appeals addressed the issue of whether or not a teacher with disabilities could insist that her employer provide her with a teacher’s aide as a form of reasonable accommodation.<sup>32</sup> As a result of an automobile accident earlier in life, a library teacher had sustained serious neurological damage that interfered with her ability to maintain appropriate student behavior. Because of her unsatisfactory performance in this respect, she was denied tenure. She contended that with the provision of a teacher’s aide to assist her in maintaining classroom control, she would be able to perform all the functions of a library teacher and therefore was otherwise qualified. The district court had entered summary judgment in favor of the school district, but the court of appeals vacated and remanded for further findings on several important issues: Was the ability to maintain appropriate student behavior an essential function of a tenured library teacher’s job? How might a teaching aide assist her in maintaining appropriate student behavior? Would providing a teaching aide be unreasonable or constitute an undue hardship?

Although the placement of the burden of proof on the first question was not entirely clear, it would seem that the employer would be in the better position to establish through job descriptions or other means whether or not a particular activity was an essential function of the job. The court noted that to avoid unfounded reliance on uninformed assumptions about job responsibilities the identification of the essential functions of a job requires a fact-specific inquiry into both the job description and how the job is actually performed in practice.

In regard to the second and third questions, the court of appeals placed the initial burden on the employee to make out a prima facie showing that a reasonable accommodation is available and then shifted the burden to the employer to prove that the suggested accommodation imposed an undue hardship. In this case, the plaintiff employee had identified a plausible accommodation, the costs of which did not clearly exceed its benefits. Therefore, the defendant employer now had the burden of proving that the proposed accommodation was unreasonable or proposed an undue hardship, taking into account the three factors identified in the regulations.<sup>33</sup>

In a suit based on alleged violations of the ADA, *Taylor v. Phoenixville School District*, a federal court of appeals addressed the issue of whether a school district failed to provide reasonable accommodations for a principal’s secretary who suffered from a mental disorder.<sup>34</sup> The district court had granted summary judgment for the defendant school district, but the court of appeals reversed and remanded. The district court was instructed to address two basic issues: (1) whether the plaintiff secretary was in fact an individual with a disability; and if so (2) whether the school district failed to provide reasonable accommodations. It is the second of these two issues that is discussed below.

The court of appeals noted that the ADA regulations provide that:

To determine the appropriate reasonable accommodation it may be necessary for the [employer] to initiate an informal, interactive process with the [employee] in need of accommodation. This process should identify the precise limitations resulting from the disability and the potential reasonable accommodations that could overcome those limitations. 29 C.F.R. § 1630.2(o)(3).<sup>35</sup>

The analysis of this interactive process is divided into two steps: first, the notice that the employee must give to trigger the employer’s obligations; and second, the employee’s and the employer’s duties once the interactive process comes into play. The notice does not have to be in writing, be made by the employee, or formally invoke the magic words “reasonable accommodation.” The notice must nonetheless make clear that the employee wants assistance for his or her disability. Once the employer knows of the disability and the employee’s wish for accommodations, the burden is on the employer to request additional information that the employer believes it needs. An employer who has received proper notice cannot escape its duty to engage in the interactive process simply because the employee did not come forward with a reasonable accommodation; however, the employee must respond to the employer’s request for more information or more detailed proposals. Participation in this interactive process is the obligation of both parties.

#### **Concluding Comments**

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 do extend protections against unjustified discrimination to educators with disabilities. It should be noted that in addition to these two federal statutes, some states have similar statutory protections. However, the federal courts have made clear that not every impairment constitutes a disability for the purposes of § 504 and the ADA. Individuals who may suffer from an impairment that imposes a problem for education or employment, but are still able to continue on with their daily lives, are unlikely to find the two federal statutes to be a practical recourse. Still, educational institutions must be sensitive to individuals’ needs for “reasonable accommodation” as defined in

federal law and regulation; but reasonable accommodation does not mean that a person with a disability should not be expected to satisfy the basic requirements of an educational program or an employment position. Nor does it mean that the cost of accommodation cannot be taken into account particularly when it imposes what is considered an “undue hardship” on the institution or employer. Rather educational institutions must take some extra steps to enable such individuals to pursue opportunities in education and employment. Creative thinking about reasonable accommodations may at least in some instances be a matter of perspective. Thinking about the possibilities rather than the problems will be a more productive approach. In conclusion, § 504 and the ADA provide protections against unjustified discrimination to otherwise qualified individuals with disabilities, who can meet educational or employment requirements with or without reasonable accommodations. Nothing more is required, and anything less would not meet the expectations of most educators.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Pub.L. 93-112, as amended by the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1974, Pub.L. 93-516.

<sup>2</sup> Americans with Disabilities Act, Pub.L. 101-336.

<sup>3</sup> *Cleburne v. Cleburne Living Center, Inc.*, 473 U.S. 432 (1985).

<sup>4</sup> *Board of Trustees of the University of Alabama, et al. v. Garrett*, 531 U.S. 367-68 (holding that suits in federal court by state employees to recover money damages by reason of the state’s failure to comply with Title I of the ADA are barred by the Eleventh Amendment).

<sup>5</sup> Americans with Disabilities Act, Pub. L. 101-336.

<sup>6</sup> 29 U.S.C. § 794(a).

<sup>7</sup> 42 U.S.C. § 706(8)(B).

<sup>8</sup> 34 CFR § 104.3(2).

<sup>9</sup> The regulations accompanying § 504 still use the terminology of “handicapped person,” rather than the terminology of “individual with a disability” used in both of the federal statutes and the ADA regulations.

<sup>10</sup> 34 C.F.R. § 104.3(l).

<sup>11</sup> 34 C.F.R. Sec. 104.44.

<sup>12</sup> See 34 C.F.R. § 104.12.

<sup>13</sup> The sections in the first three titles of the ADA that provide the basic protections against unjustified discrimination all follow the language of § 504, as do the ADA statutory definitions and agency regulations. For the purposes of this article, it is not necessary to repeat them.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Disability Rights Section, “A Guide to Disability Rights Laws, <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/cguide.htm>. The basic prohibition of unjustified discrimination in employment is found at 42 U.S.C. § 12112(a). The agency regulations for Title I are found at Title 29 of the Code of Federal Regulations, Part 1630.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* The basic prohibition of unjustified discrimination in public services is found at 42 U.S.C. § 12132. The agency regulations for Title II are found at Title 28 of the Code of Federal Regulations, Part 35.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* The basic prohibition of unjustified discrimination in public accommodations is found at 42 U.S.C. § 12182. The agency regulations for Title III are found at Title 28, Code of Federal Regulations, Part 36.

<sup>17</sup> *School Board of Nassau County v. Arline*, 480 U.S. 273 (1986).

<sup>18</sup> *Bragdon v. Abbott*, 524 U.S. 624 (1998).

<sup>19</sup> 527 U.S. 516 (1999).

<sup>20</sup> 527 U.S. 471 (1999).

<sup>21</sup> 534 U.S. 184 (2002).

<sup>22</sup> *Wong v. Regents of the University of California*, 379 F.3d 1097 (9th Cir. 2004).

<sup>23</sup> *Peters v. Baldwin Union Free School District*, 320 F.3d 164 (2nd Cir. 2003).

<sup>24</sup> 442 U.S. 397 (1979).

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 406.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 410.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 412-13.

<sup>28</sup> 480 U.S. 273 (1987).

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 287.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at n. 17.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 288.

<sup>32</sup> 63 F.3d 131 (2nd Cir. 1995).

<sup>33</sup> See 34 C.F.R. § 104.12(b).

<sup>34</sup> 184 F.3d 296 (3rd Cir. 1999).

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 311.

# 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.”<sup>1</sup>

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*.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> The absence of statistics on the number of educators with disabilities<sup>4</sup> and the limited literature on the use of affirmative action to redress historical inequities<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, it is the law under the federal American with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA)<sup>7</sup> and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1993,<sup>8</sup> 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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**Barbara L. Brock is Associate Professor of Education at Creighton University.**

## 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> Although the ADA was a giant step forward, the overall employment rate of people with disabilities has grown only slightly. According to Hernandez, Keys, Balcazar, and Drum, two underlying obstacles have contributed to slow progress.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

## 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—lowa, 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.<sup>14</sup>

## 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, bronchiectasis, 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> Quotation from an interview subject, a college instructor with a disability.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Keller et al., "Introduction."

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> Americans with Disabilities Act, Pub.L. 101-336.

<sup>8</sup> Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Pub.L. 93-112, as amended by the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1974, Pub.L. 93-516.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Mairs, *Waist High in the World* (MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Lyn Jounbloed 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.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

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

<sup>14</sup> 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).

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

<sup>16</sup> 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.

# An Exploratory Analysis of Employment-Related Experiences of Educators with Learning Disabilities

**Susan A. Vogel, Christopher Murray, Carol Wren, and Pamela B. Adelman<sup>1</sup>**

The purpose of this study was to explore the general professional experiences of educators with learning disabilities, the unique skills and challenges among this group attributable to their experience as persons with learning disabilities, and their experience of schools as an employment context. There are several important reasons to develop a further understanding about the professional lives of educators with learning disabilities. First, a number of studies have found that adults with learning disabilities have lower rates of employment, lower earnings, and lower rates of postsecondary school attendance than adults without disabilities.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, other researchers have reported that some adults with learning disabilities had achieved equivalent or better employment outcomes than adults without disabilities.<sup>3</sup> In light of these findings, we believe that developing a further understanding of the lives of adults with learning disabilities who *are* employed, particularly as teachers, is a valuable endeavor because results of such investigations may provide insights that can lead to enhanced services and improved outcomes among future generations of children, youth, and adults with learning disabilities.

A second reason to develop a further understanding of the professional lives of educators with learning disabilities is that this population may have unique experiences that inform their beliefs about children and learning. One of the primary themes to emerge from recent qualitative studies was that teachers viewed their learning disabilities as an asset rather than a deficit.<sup>4</sup> This asset perspective was evident in participants' compassion for students with learning difficulties and in their beliefs that students with disabilities could be successful in school.

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**Susan A. Vogel is Distinguished Research Professor Emerita and former Director, Enhancing Success for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education Project, Northern Illinois University. Christopher Murray is Associate Professor of Special Education at the University of Oregon. Carol Wren is Associate Professor of Education and former Associate Dean of the School of Education at DePaul University. Pamela B. Adelman is founding Executive Director of Hyde Park Day Schools.**

Third, for the majority of adults engagement in a professional career is a long-term commitment that impacts social experiences, emotional health, and overall life satisfaction. It is likely that different career choices have differential effects on the social and emotional lives of adults. Certainly, individuals experience employment roles and work contexts differently. It may also be true that certain groups of individuals find a better "fit" with some jobs than others. Such groups may share certain characteristics and traits that are a better match for some employment contexts than others, or, conversely, certain employment contexts may provide a better match for some individuals than others.<sup>5</sup> Schools may be a particularly well-suited context of employment for adults with learning disabilities. Virtually all professionals working in schools have had some exposure to and experience with students with learning disabilities. In addition, in many states, educators have had to take coursework in the area of special education. Furthermore, because of an increased emphasis on inclusion, general education teachers spend more time interacting with special educators and learning more about students with disabilities and special education services and laws. As such, one would be hard pressed to identify a large-scale professional context that has had as much experience with the field of special education as schools. Therefore, we hypothesized that schools would provide a good employment context for those with learning disabilities simply because education professionals have knowledge about and experience with individuals with special needs.

## Methods

The sample for the current investigation included 59 adults with learning disabilities who were also participating in a longitudinal study. All of the individuals had attended a competitive college located in a suburb of a large Midwestern city where they received comprehensive support services and accommodations. Approximately 32% of the sample was male and 68% female, similar in composition to this college's general population. (The institution had formerly been a women's college.) Ninety-seven percent of the participants were White, and 3% were African American. At the time of this investigation, 49 of the adults reported being employed. Because we were primarily interested in employment-related experiences, our analyses were limited to this subsample ( $n = 49$ ).

Nine of the 49 individuals with learning disabilities were employed as educators. With regard to educational level, four reported having a Master's degree, and five a B.A. Of those with a graduate degree, two held a Master's degree in education and two a Master's degree in special education. Of those with a bachelor's degree, two had a B.A. in a field other than education but had returned to college for certification; while two had a B.A. in elementary education, and the last individual had a B.A. in studio arts. All indicated that they worked in the field of education--five as teachers and four as teacher assistants. Approximately 44% completed graduate degrees with an additional 12% having attended some graduate school. The group of "other professionals" with learning disabilities ( $n = 40$ ) were employed in three broad fields: business/professional ( $n = 26$ ), service/secretarial ( $n = 13$ ), and trades ( $n = 1$ ). Approximately 13% had completed graduate degree programs, and an additional 6% had attended some graduate school.

The survey instrument used in this investigation was administered by phone and contained items related to background characteristics, employment, compensatory strategies, disclosure, personal

information, social-emotional health and physical well-being. (See Appendix for a list of the survey items.) The item response format included Likert scale, dichotomous (yes/no); qualitative (open-ended); and descriptive items (income and educational level). All interviews were conducted by interviewers who participated in approximately 10 hours of training in telephone interviewing strategies, the use of scripts; and the survey itself.<sup>6</sup> Interviewers also participated in mock interviews prior to administering the survey to participants. Each interview took between 60 and 90 minutes. Initially, the interviewers tape-recorded their voices (not the participants') during the interviews, and the project director listened to the tapes and provided additional feedback. As interviews were taking place, all responses were entered directly into a computer database to achieve the highest level of accuracy and completeness, especially important in responses to the open-ended items. All quantitative data were then transferred to an SPSS file prior to conducting quantitative analyses. Qualitative data were transferred to an Excel file, and qualitative codes were assigned based on thematic units or persistent perspectives held by respondents.<sup>7</sup>

The researchers recognized two major limitations of the study. First, the data gathered were generated by personal accounts, and such data are susceptible to inaccuracies. We attempted to cross-validate or cross-verify findings when possible by examining both

quantitative and qualitative responses. Despite these efforts, the findings are still based on a single source (i.e., the respondent) and therefore should be viewed with caution. Future investigations that collect data from multiple sources (e.g., resumes, transcripts, contracts, employers, friends, and family members) would allow for validation of responses. A second limitation was that these findings were based on a small sample of educators who attended the same college for at least part of their undergraduate education, limiting the generalizability of these data. Future investigations that explore these issues among larger and more diverse populations would help to clarify the patterns observed here.

## Results

Three sets of analyses were conducted to examine the employment-related and personal experiences of educators and other professionals with learning disabilities. First, means, standard deviations, and t-test results for employment-related outcomes measured on a Likert-type scale were calculated (See Table 1.) Proportions were then calculated for each group to compare differences between the groups on dichotomous variables. (See Table 2.) Finally, qualitative analyses were conducted on open-ended items pertaining to employment-related and personal experience variables to enrich the quantitative findings.

**Table 1**  
**Results of t-tests Comparing Educators and Other Professionals with Learning Disabilities (LD)**

Item	Educators with LD			Other Professionals with LD			
	Mean	SD <sup>1</sup>	Range	Mean	SD	Range	t
Job satisfaction	4.33	(1.0)	2.0-5.0	3.95	(1.0)	2.0-5.0	1.0
Self-rating of job success	4.67	(.50)	4.0-5.0	4.28	(.76)	3.0-5.0	1.9*
Positive effect of LD on job	4.22	(.68)	3.0-5.0	2.68	(1.5)	1.0-5.0	4.7****
Negative effect of LD on job	2.13	(1.5)	1.0-5.0	2.31	(1.2)	1.0-5.0	-.4
Relationship of college courses	4.00	(1.3)	1.0-5.0	2.57	(1.2)	1.0-5.0	3.2***
Length of time with employer	3.00	(.00)	3.0-3.0	2.88	(.43)	2.0-3.0	3.0***
Yearly earnings (\$)	37,338	(15,840)	12,500-56,000	53,127	(34,055)	5,000-160,000	-1.3
Self-rating of social life	4.29	(.49)	4.0-5.0	3.70	(1.1)	1.0-5.0	2.3**
	n = 7-9			n = 40			

\*p < .10, \*\* p < .05, \*\*\* p < .01, \*\*\*\*p>.0001. Levene's test for equality of variance was conducted for all tests. In cases where equal variances were assumed, pooled variance t-tests were conducted. In cases where variances were not assumed to be equal, separate variance t-tests were utilized.

<sup>1</sup>SD = Standard Deviation.

**Table 2**  
**Employment and Emotional Health of Educators and Other Professionals with Learning Disabilities (LD)**

Item	Educators		Other Professionals	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
<b>Employment-Related Questions:</b>				
Disclosure of LD during interview?	12%	88%	5%	95%
Disclosure of LD at work?	88	12	51	49
Looking for a new job?	22	78	15	85
<b>Health-Related Question:</b>				
Does LD affect emotional health?	33	67	43	57
	n = 9		n = 49	

In Table 1, we see that educators with learning disabilities had statistically significantly higher scores than other professionals with learning disabilities on the self-reported items related to the positive effect their learning disabilities had on the job ( $p > .001$ ), the extent to which their college coursework related to their careers ( $p > .01$ ), and the length of time they had worked in their current position ( $p > .01$ ). In addition, educators with learning disabilities expressed greater job satisfaction ( $p < .10$ ). Lastly, educators with learning disabilities had a statistically significantly higher self-rating on quality of social life ( $p < .05$ ).

In Table 2, responses on dichotomous variables are presented. Here, a greater proportion of educators disclosed their learning disability on the job (88%) as compared to other professionals with learning disabilities (51%); but only 12% and 5%, respectively, disclosed a learning disability during the interview process. We also examined the proportion of professionals in each group who were “seeking a new job.” Here 22% of educators with learning disabilities were seeking new employment as compared to 15% of other professionals with learning disabilities. Finally, respondents were asked if their learning disability affected their emotional well-being? A lower percentage of educators with disabilities (33%) responded affirmatively than other professionals with disabilities (43%).

To explore the employment experiences of these adults further, qualitative analyses were conducted on responses to five open ended items.

*(1) Please describe the positive effect of your learning disabilities in the job.*

All of the educators with learning disabilities responded to this prompt, and a consistent theme that emerged was that their learning disability provided them with unique insights and experiences that allowed them to be more responsive to and compassionate towards students with learning disabilities. An example of this theme was evident in the following statement:

I’m a better teacher because I understand learning disabilities. I always make sure they’re in the front next to me... I have them read to me. I have parents come in. They’re always on my mind because I know they won’t understand unless I explain things in a different way.

Another educator stated, “The largest one is I understand what it’s like to have a learning disability. I have a lot of compassion.”

A much smaller proportion (70%) of other professionals with learning disabilities responded to this prompt, and many stated that their learning disabilities had no positive effect on their job. Among those that did respond, the primary theme related to the importance of working carefully:

I meticulously check and recheck due to my learning disability... I have a lack of concentration so I am pretty meticulous with crossing my t’s and dotting my i’s. I work more hours. My projects run on time every time.

Another professional stated: “It makes me take my time. I’m not rushing and missing things. Knowing I have a reading disability makes me slow down and have things structured.”

*(2) What factors have enhanced your success on the job?*

Among educators with learning disabilities, two primary themes emerged in response to this prompt. The first suggested that these adults felt personally responsible for their success, as follows: “My ability to work hard. I go over things. I’m creative. I do things with the kids, fun things that make learning enjoyable.” Other educators attributed their success to environmental supports, including contexts. One educator stated: “The people are pretty cool. They have faith in my decision-making,” and another stated, “I think the environment itself.” Among other professionals with learning disabilities, similar themes were observed. Approximately half of these adults attributed success to individual traits: “I have good people skills, and I’m extremely organized and a perfectionist. You have to be in this business. Because things come hard for me, I work harder

and I make sure it's right before I show it to a client... I'm fast, efficient, and very organized." Other professionals also attributed their success to environmental supports: "Support of the people around me when you're going through those difficult moments. I work in a company with a lot of women, so there's a lot of emotion and there's a lot of support."

*(3) How do you compensate for your learning disabilities on the job?*

Both groups had similar comments regarding compensatory strategies for perceived weaknesses resulting from their learning disabilities. The two most consistent themes were having extended time to complete tasks and the use of technology. For example, one of the educators stated: "Technology, using the computer. Wordprocessing technology helps. I still like books on tape... and just time. The realization that it takes time to go through a new thing." Similarly one of the other professionals with learning disabilities remarked, "I just slow down, read through things several times, make sure I know what I'm doing before I take on a responsibility."

*(4) Has the impact of your learning disabilities changed over time?*

In response to this question, both groups indicated that they have developed greater acceptance of their learning disabilities along with personal and professional compensatory strategies. This theme is evident in a comment made by one of the educators: "I've learned to cope with it more and accept it and try to find any kind of compensation to work around it." One of the other professionals stated: "You learn how to cope with it once you figure out what it is. I use my strengths to compensate for my weaknesses. My verbal skills, number skills, to off-set my reading skills, listening skills. Since I'm out of school, I don't see it as much."

A second theme that emerged was that employment-related experiences during adulthood were more positive than school-related experiences during childhood. Although it was difficult to discern whether these changes in perspective were related to differences between school and work contexts or due to maturation, clearly respondents in both groups felt that adult employment provided more opportunities for success than did educational experiences. For example, one educator with learning disabilities stated: "When I'm in a position that I've had experience in, it doesn't affect me very much. When I'm in school, it's more noticeable than when I'm on the job." One of the other professionals made a similar comment: "I'm not in school anymore so it doesn't have a big impact. In school, I was dealing with it every day."

*(5) If your learning disability affects your emotional well-being, how does it affect you?*

As a follow-up to the dichotomous question, "Does your learning disabilities affect your emotional well-being?" all professionals who answered affirmatively (33% of educators and 43% of other professionals) were asked to describe how their learning disabilities affected their emotional health. Both groups felt that lack of confidence, poor self-esteem, and anxiety were issues that stemmed from their experiences of having a learning disability. However, in virtually all cases, they expressed fewer issues related to adulthood than childhood. For example, one of the educators with learning disabilities described the impact of school experiences during childhood as follows: "It doesn't feel good when you're always at the bottom of the class. I remember in sixth grade, the one area I excelled in was art. I was often devastated... Not now so much. It does when you're younger...

You get more self-confidence." A statement made by one of the other professionals suggested a similar experience:

It's definitely.....how could it not affect you when you're not being placed in mainstream classes, not being able to do the work like everyone else, your self-esteem as a child. It's much easier as an adult. You don't have to put yourself in situations where you can't succeed. I just want to go back and tell my teachers.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this investigation was to explore the employment-related experiences of educators with learning disabilities in comparison to other professionals with learning disabilities. We were particularly interested in developing a greater understanding of the general professional experiences, unique skills attributable to their experience as persons with learning disabilities, and schools as a potentially supportive context for educators with learning disabilities..

There were a number of important findings related to the educational attainment and professional experiences of educators and other professionals with learning disabilities. First, we expected that all educators would have completed a Bachelor's degree given state requirements for teacher education. However, we did not expect that almost three times as many educators with learning disabilities would have earned a graduate degree as other professionals with learning disabilities. It is possible that salary incentives for teachers to continue their education offered by some school districts may account at least in part for this difference.

Findings from both quantitative and qualitative analyses suggested that a larger percentage of educators with learning disabilities felt that their learning disability was an asset in their current profession than other professionals with learning disabilities. In particular, educators responded that their learning disabilities impacted positively their understanding of the problems of their students with learning disabilities, their compassion towards students and parents, and the strategies they used in their classrooms. Further support for this theme was provided in response to the question regarding the effect of their learning disabilities over time. Both educators and other professionals indicated that their lives as students had been challenging. For educators, however, these challenges appeared to provide a basis for their current beliefs and classroom practices. Particularly evident among educators was the belief that they could "identify with" and support students who were unique because of their own childhood experiences as students with learning disabilities. These results support earlier findings in this area.<sup>8</sup>

Findings from this investigation provided tentative support for our hypothesis that schools are uniquely situated as supportive employment contexts for professionals with learning disabilities. Educators in this study felt that their learning disabilities had a strong positive impact on their ability to fulfill the role of an educator. In addition, the vast majority (88%) of educators felt comfortable disclosing their learning disability to someone in the workplace compared to only half of other professionals with learning disabilities. Together, these findings suggested that educational contexts may indeed have qualities that provide a good employment fit for adults with learning disabilities. However, given the limitations of the sample, it is clear that more extensive research is needed.

## Endnotes

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<sup>3</sup> Pamela B. Adelman, and Susan A. Vogel, "Life Style Issues of Adults with Learning Disabilities 8-15 Years After College," in *Learning Disabilities in Higher Education and Beyond: An International Perspective*, ed. Susan A. Vogel, Gila Vogel, Varda Sharoni, and Orit Dahan (Baltimore: York Press, 2003); Rosalie P. Fink, "Mastery of Literacy and Life: Individual Interests and Literacy Development in Successful Adults with Dyslexia," in *Learning Disabilities in Higher Education and Beyond: An International Perspective*, ed. Susan A. Vogel, Gila Vogel, Varda Sharoni, and Orit Dahan (Baltimore, MD: York Press, 2003); Paul J. Gerber, Rick Ginsberg, and Henry B. Reiff, "Identifying Alterable Patterns in Employment Success for Highly Successful Adults with Learning Disabilities," *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 25 (1992): 475-487; Susan A. Vogel and Pamela B. Adelman, "Adults with Learning Disabilities 8-15 Years After College," *Learning Disabilities: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 10 (2000): 165-182.

<sup>4</sup> Beth A. Ferri, Charlotte Hendrick-Keefe, and Noel Gregg, "Teachers with Learning Disabilities: A View from Both Sides of the Desk," *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 34 (2001): 22-32; Beth A. Ferri, David

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<sup>5</sup> Clayton E. Keller, "Understanding and Improving the Career Development of Educators with Disabilities," in *Enhancing Diversity: Educators with Disabilities*, ed. Ronald J. Anderson, Clayton E. Keller, and Joan M. Karp (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Alexa Darby, Susan A. Vogel, and Pamela B. Adelman, "Telephone Interview Strategies in Conducting Follow-Up Studies with Adults with Learning Disabilities," *Thalamus* 19 (2001): 41-48.

<sup>7</sup> Robert C. Bogdan and Sari K. Biklen, *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1982.)

<sup>8</sup> Ferri et al., "Teachers with Learning Disabilities;" Gerber, "Trials and Tribulations."

**Appendix**  
**Items for Survey of Educators with Learning Disabilities (LD)**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Response/Format</b>
<b>Likert type Items</b>	
How satisfied are you with your present employment situation?	1 = "not at all" to 5 = "very satisfied"
How would you rate your success at this job?	1 = "least" to 5 = "most"
What is the extent of the positive effect of your LD on the job?	1 = "a little" to 5 = "a lot"
What is the extent of the negative effect of your LD on the job?	1 = "a little" to 5 = "a lot"
How much does your college coursework relate to your current job?	1 = "not related" to 5 = "highly related"
In your current job, how long have you been working for this employer?	1 = weeks; 2 = months; 3 = years
How would you rate your social life?	1 = "not very satisfying" to 5 = "very satisfying"
<b>Dichotomous Items</b>	
Did you disclose your LD during the application process?	Yes/No
Have you told anyone in your work setting about your LD?	Yes/No
Are you looking for a new job?	Yes/No
Does your LD affect your emotional well-being?	Yes/No
<b>Qualitative Items</b>	
Please describe the positive effects of your LD in your current job.	Open-ended
Please describe the negative effects of your LD in your current job.	Open-ended
What factors have enhanced your success on the job?	Open-ended
What factors, if any, have been barriers to your success on the job?	Open-ended
How do you compensate for your LD on the job?	Open-ended
Has the impact of your LD changed over time?	Open-ended
What advice would you give to someone who is considering the same type of work that you do?	Open-ended
If your LD affects your emotional well-being, how does it affect you?	Open-ended
<b>Other Items</b>	
Gross earnings for current job? <sup>1</sup>	weekly, monthly, or yearly earnings
Participant's highest level of education	some college, B.A., some graduate school, graduate degree

<sup>1</sup> All earnings were converted to yearly gross.

# Adolescent Perceptions of Educators with Physical Challenges

Marie Beattie<sup>1</sup>

In 1987, I had a massive stroke, possibly caused by a brain tumor. Before this, I had been a special education teacher for 13 years. The stroke caused me to have to relearn basic math, language, and motor functions. With extensive therapy over the next year and a half, I achieved a partial recovery. I then sought employment at a self-contained private high school. My disability was too severe for me to be hired as a teacher; however, I was allowed to volunteer in the classroom as an aide. I found I still had a good rapport with students. I believed I could still teach them, but I was not sure of their attitude towards me. They seemed to enjoy the time they spent with me. Still I was not sure if they felt sorry for me, or if they were impressed with what I had managed to accomplish. I wondered how much of their attitude toward me was the result of my handicap, and how much was from my abilities. Was their kindness just a sign of good manners? Would they have been comfortable with me if I had actually been their teacher? These questions led to the following research.

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of physically challenged educators' disabilities on their students, focusing specifically on the attitudes of both male and female public high school students in 9th through 12th grades. Due to the lack of reports in the literature concerning nondisabled students' perceptions of teachers or non-teaching faculty who are categorized as disabled, there is little information beyond case studies of physically challenged teachers incorporating their disability into their work life. The question remains: How does that disability affect students from the students' points-of-view?

Individuals with disabilities within education professions in the United States are a substantial presence.<sup>2</sup> They are graduate students, practitioners, educators on leave, as well as those who have left the field entirely. They include teachers, counselors, professors, and administrators. Some of them were disabled prior to beginning their careers with disabilities such as learning disabilities, deafness or hearing loss, cerebral palsy, blindness or visual impairments, and polio. Other educators acquired their impairments well into their careers, for example, through cancer, multiple sclerosis, strokes, and lupus. Most educators with disabilities, though, would see themselves as professionals first and disabled persons second, and their priority, in most cases, is on providing quality education to their students.

Educators with disabilities can provide excellent role models for students with disabilities.<sup>3</sup> Their presence can influence the perceptions and the attitudes of both fellow staff members and students, helping them to develop appraisals of which limitations go with which disabilities under what circumstances and to what effects,

including, possibly, whether any of these differences really matter. For these reasons and others, Keller, Anderson, and Karp have urged that people with disabilities should be actively recruited into educational professions, encouraged in their preparation as educators in institutions of higher learning, and supported during their practice as professionals.<sup>4</sup>

One might assume that for some students their teacher's disability would evoke feelings of sympathy or empathy while in others it could produce fear and discomfort. During the debates about the integration or inclusion of students with disabilities into general education some years ago, authors such as Kauffman noted that teachers could be resistant to having special education students in their classrooms, a concern that may be reappearing today with the high stakes testing of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Is the reverse true? What do the students of teachers with disabilities see first: the disability or the teacher?

## Methods

A questionnaire using a five-point Likert-type scale was used to assess the attitudes of a sample of students from high schools in six regions in Texas. The six questions were: (1) Do you think you have learned to handle life better because you have had a disabled teacher? (2) Does the disability have a negative effect on the way you feel about your teacher? (3) Are you more helpful and cooperative because your teacher has a disability? (4) Do you feel comfortable talking to your teacher about the disability? (5) Does the disability have a positive effect on the way you feel toward your teacher? (6) Are you better able to understand disabled people in society because of your teacher? The questionnaire also allowed students to add comments.

Participants were identified by sending a letter to the superintendents of independent school districts within six state-designated educational regions in Texas. The letter explained the purpose of the study and sought permission to survey students who had a disabled teacher. First, the superintendent was asked if the district had any high school faculty who were disabled and had daily contact with students. Second, permission to survey those students was requested. Third, it was explained that all responses were voluntary. The researcher received 200 responses from those who gave permission and were sent questionnaires. Students were in the 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. Students in all grade levels came from more than one school.

The principals who agreed to participate were asked to administer the questionnaires to students during a randomly selected class period, e.g., period three, or the next occupied class should that one be the teacher's free period. Students were told that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. The only identifying information asked of the students was their gender and grade. The principal was provided with a debriefing statement to be read to the students after administration of the questionnaire. The disabled educators had a variety of disabilities. There were also non-teaching faculty such as librarians or counselors. The study did not include administrative staff with disabilities.

One goal of the analysis was to test for differences across grade levels to see if age or experience in school was related to the attitudes of the participating high school students toward their teachers with physical disabilities. It was decided to collapse the 9th and 10th grade respondents into one group to equalize the number across the

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**Marie Beattie is an independent scholar in special education based in Bedford, Texas.**

grades. The totals for grades 9 and 10 were 27 and 32, respectively. Each of these amounts represented less than 20% of the 200 subjects while each of the 11th and 12th grades were more than 30% of the total. By collapsing grades 9 and 10 into one group of 59, the resulting 29.5% of the total of 200 respondents was closer to the percentages the 11th and 12th grade participants.

A second goal of the study was to test for gender differences in the students' responses. However, there were few 10th grade males. After collapsing the 9th and 10th grade students together, a Chi Square test of the gender generated statistically significant results ( $\chi^2 = 7.97$ , 2 df,  $p < .05$ ). As such, the numbers of male and female students were not balanced and were significantly different than what would be expected. Due to this result, none of the questions was tested for gender differences. For descriptive purposes only, the percentages of responses to the 5-points of the questionnaire's Likert-type scale by gender were reported.

### Results

Table 1 reports the percentages of the participating students' responses to the six questions of the study by gender and grade groupings. Students used the open-ended comment option provided by the questionnaire infrequently but, when used, the comments provided were often informative and extended the quantitative results.

Students generally responded affirmatively to the first survey

questions: Do you think you have learned to handle life better because you have had a disabled teacher? However, a much larger percentage (71.6%) of the female students responded "frequently" or "always" than did males (46.6%). Also, there was a statistically significant difference in responses across grade levels ( $n = 197$ ,  $\chi^2 = 13.81$ , 6 df,  $p < .05$ ). Positive responses ("frequently" or "always") were reported by 63.8% of 9th/10th graders and 57.2% of 12 graders compared with 37.1% of 11th graders.

For the second question, which asked if teachers' disabilities negatively affected students' feelings about them, there was no statistically significant differences in results across grade levels where between 82.8% and 88.7% of respondents answered "never." A slightly lower percentage of males (83.5%) than females (91.3%) responded "never."

The third survey question asked: Are you more helpful and cooperative because your teacher has a disability? Here there was a statistically significant difference in grade level responses ( $n = 196$ ,  $\chi^2 = 23.79$ , 6 df,  $p < .01$ ). The 9th/10th graders reported being more helpful and cooperative because of their teacher's disability, with 63.8% responding "frequently" or "always," as opposed to 12th graders (45.5%). A slightly lower percentage of males (50.5%) than females (58.9%) responded "frequently" or "always." This question generated the most open-ended comments that frequently alluded to students' not seeing their teachers as disabled.

**Table 1**  
**Responses of Students by Gender and by Grade**

		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
<b>Question 1:</b> <b>Do you think you have learned to handle life better because you have had a disabled teacher?</b>	<b>Males</b>	14.8%	12.5%	26.1%	18.2%	28.4%
	<b>Females</b>	10.2%	8.0%	34.1%	28.4%	43.2%
	<b>9th/10th</b>	6.9%	8.6%	20.7%	24.1%	39.7%
	<b>11th</b>	17.7%	14.5%	30.6%	19.4%	17.7%
	<b>12th</b>	9.1%	5.2%	28.6%	19.5%	37.7%
<b>Question 2:</b> <b>Does the disability have a negative effect on the way you feel about your teacher?</b>	<b>Males</b>	83.5%	7.7%	5.5%	2.2%	1.1%
	<b>Females</b>	91.3%	7.8%	1.0%	1.9%	2.9%
	<b>9th/10th</b>	82.8%	6.9%	6.9%	3.4%	0.0%
	<b>11th</b>	88.7%	9.7%	1.6%	0.0%	0.0%
	<b>12th</b>	84.8%	6.3%	1.3%	2.5%	5.1%
<b>Question 3:</b> <b>Are you more helpful and cooperative because your teacher has a disability?</b>	<b>Males</b>	12.4%	7.9%	29.2%	22.4%	28.1%
	<b>Females</b>	6.5%	15.9%	18.7%	17.8%	41.1%
	<b>9th/10th</b>	3.4%	1.7%	31.0%	15.5%	48.3%
	<b>11th</b>	9.8%	8.2%	23.0%	24.6%	34.4%
	<b>12th</b>	13.0%	23.4%	18.2%	19.5%	26.0%

Table 1 continued on next page

**Table I continued**  
**Responses of Students by Gender and by Grade**

		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
<b>Question 4:</b> <b>Do you feel comfortable talking to your teacher about the disability?</b>	<b>Males</b>	28.9%	18.9%	15.6%	11.1%	25.6%
	<b>Females</b>	18.5%	13.0%	24.1%	8.3%	36.1%
	<b>9th/10th</b>	16.9%	13.6%	22.0%	10.2%	37.3%
	<b>11th</b>	27.4%	14.5%	22.6%	11.3%	24.2%
	<b>12th</b>	24.7%	18.2%	16.9%	7.8%	32.5%
<b>Question 5:</b> <b>Does the disability have a positive effect on the way you feel toward your teacher?</b>	<b>Males</b>	20.0%	4.4%	14.4%	23.3%	37.8%
	<b>Females</b>	11.2%	5.6%	26.2%	15.0%	42.1%
	<b>9th/10th</b>	13.6%	5.1%	25.4%	15.3%	40.7%
	<b>11th</b>	14.8%	6.6%	19.7%	19.7%	39.3%
	<b>12th</b>	16.9%	3.9%	18.2%	20.8%	40.3%
<b>Question 6:</b> <b>Are you better able to understand disabled people in society because of your teacher?</b>	<b>Males</b>	7.7%	6.6%	26.4%	26.4%	33.0%
	<b>Females</b>	2.8%	5.5%	21.1%	23.9%	46.8%
	<b>9th/10th</b>	1.7%	3.4%	23.7%	20.3%	50.8%
	<b>11th</b>	4.8%	1.6%	27.4%	37.1%	29.0%
	<b>12th</b>	7.6%	11.4%	20.3%	19.0%	41.8%

There was no statistically significant grade level difference to the responses to the fourth question: Do you feel comfortable talking to your teacher about the disability? Here responses were more evenly split across all categories, ranging from “never” to “always.” Comments by the students included:

“[I] don’t consider it.” (12th grade female)

“I don’t feel its [sic] necessary.” (12th grade male)

“It’s not an issue.” (11th grade male)

Quantitative responses by gender were similar to those by grade level.

The fifth survey question restated the second in a positive way, inquiring as to whether a teacher’s disability had a positive effect on the students’ feelings toward her or him. There was no statistically significant grade level difference in responses. When looking at these two questions, it is important to observe the patterns of responses. When the effect was stated in the negative, students were emphatic that their teacher’s disability “rarely” or “never” had a negative impact. When stated as a positive effect, the students’ responses were not as strong. Across grade levels, between 56.0% and 61.1% responded “frequently” or “always.” A slightly higher percentage of males (61.1%) than females (57.1%) responded in this manner. Three students provided additional comments suggesting that their teachers’ disability did not have any effect one way or the other.

The final survey question asked: Are you better able to understand disabled people in society because of your teacher? Here there was

a statistically significant grade level difference in the responses ( $n = 200$ ,  $\chi^2 = 11.48$ , 4 df,  $p < .05$ ). For 9th/10th graders, 71.1% responded “frequently” or “always” compared to 66.1% of 11th graders and 60.8% of 12th graders. Female students also responded more positively to this item (70.7%) than did males (59.4%). One 12th grade male commented: “I’ve always accepted a person (or people) if they were disabled or not.”

### **Conclusion**

This study was exploratory, addressing a topic that has not been investigated previously: the perceptions of adolescents toward educators with physical disabilities. To do so, the researcher administered a self-developed survey to a sample of 200 public high school students in Texas. Results were reported by grade level and gender. Overall the attitudes expressed by the students to their physically challenged teachers showed that the disability not only did not have a negative impact but, for the most part, the impact as stated by the students was positive. In addition, some students took pains to write comments that indicated respect for the teacher as a teacher and not as a disabled person. They were careful to observe that their ability to judge someone was not colored by the person’s disability. It appears to this researcher that this is an important area of research that needs to be extended. Elucidating the factors that help to form perceptions may dissolve the myths and fears of administrators and human resource personnel when questions about hiring physically challenged educators arise.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Sharon Smart, Nancy Northrup, Bobbie Johnson, and Clayton Keller for their assistance with and support of this manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> Joanne Gilmore, Diane Merchant, and April Moore, *Educators with Disabilities: A Resource Guide* (Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1980), ED204304.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Ronald J. Anderson and Joan M. Karp, "The Role of Support Systems for Educators with Disabilities," in *Enhancing Diversity: Educators with Disabilities*, ed. Ronald J. Anderson, Clayton E. Keller, and Joan M. Karp (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1998); Harlan Hahn, "Advocacy and Educators with Disabilities: Emerging Issues and Opportunities," in *Enhancing Diversity: Educators with Disabilities*.

<sup>4</sup> Clayton E. Keller, Ronald J. Anderson, and Joan M. Karp, "Introduction," in *Enhancing Diversity: Educators with Disabilities*.

<sup>5</sup> Ian McNett and Diane Merchant, "Disabled Educators: Assets, not Handicaps to Good Teaching," *Today's Education* 70 (February-March 1981): 34-37.

<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, the focus of study was on the students' perceptions and not their actions, which points to a potential limitation of the research. The sensitive nature of the items on the questionnaire also presented the possibility that students would respond in ways that they thought the researcher or the adults in their school would want, and not as they really felt.

# Systems of Support: The Educators with Disabilities Caucus and Its Mentoring Program

**Polly G. Haselden, Pamela K. De Loach,  
Jennifer Miller, Monica Campbell, Lynn Boyer,  
and Nancy Anderson**

In the field of education, critics have described the experiences of beginning teaching as “sink or swim, trial by fire, or boot camp experiences.”<sup>1</sup> Novice teachers face a critical transition period as they evolve from students who are solely responsible for themselves to teachers who are responsible for the learning of all of the students in their classrooms. During this transitional time, the outlook for the success rate of these teachers is disheartening. For instance, Ingersoll noted that 50% of novice teachers leave the field of education within their first five years of teaching.<sup>2</sup> Given these alarming statistics, it is clear that more interventions must be implemented to support and retain teaching professionals.

To understand what must be done to support novice teachers, the field must understand the challenges that teachers face during this critical period. These include: (a) identifying effective teaching methods; (b) developing appropriate classroom management strategies; (c) having appropriate materials and supplies for their classrooms; (d) satisfying the learning styles of different types of students; (e) effectively handling discipline issues; and (f) having enough time for appropriate instructional planning.<sup>3</sup> In addition, beginning teachers were concerned with paperwork, parental engagement, and the need for outside support;<sup>4</sup> while beginning special education teachers were concerned with policies, procedures, paperwork, and interactions with others.<sup>5</sup>

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**Polly Haselden is Assistant Professor in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. Pamela K. De Loach is a special education teacher for students with severe and multiple handicaps with the Hillsborough County School District, Tampa, Florida. Jennifer Miller is a special educator for the Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland. Monica Campbell is Assistant Professor in the Department of Early Childhood and Special Education at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. Lynn Boyer is Executive Director of the Office of Special Education, Extended and Early Learning in the West Virginia Department of Education. Nancy Anderson is Special Education Policies and Procedures Coordinator for the Virginia Department of Education’s Training/Technical Assistance Center at George Mason University.**

These findings provide professionals with a set of identified needs of beginning teachers. One common intervention has been the use of mentoring within school districts.<sup>6</sup> Mentoring programs have been well-publicized in the last decade as a means to support and retain beginning teachers.<sup>7</sup> Although mentoring programs have a common, defined purpose to provide support to beginning teachers, the types of mentoring programs vary greatly.<sup>8</sup> Mentoring programs also vary as a result of how structural or procedural factors are addressed. Characteristics related to time, for instance, the amount of time allowed or required for mentoring and the structured or ad hoc nature of how mentoring time occurs, create great differences across programs. How mentors are paired with mentees is another factor. Some programs have guidelines as to the types of mentors selected for new teachers, i.e., a beginning science teacher paired with a tenured science teacher, and others do not.<sup>9</sup> Although studies have been conducted to determine the effects of mentoring programs on teacher attrition, the type of mentoring program must be taken into account when evaluating their effectiveness.<sup>10</sup>

Results of research on the effectiveness of mentoring programs have been positive. It has been found over time that novice teachers who participate in mentoring programs use a variety of teaching practices, are better prepared for instruction, are more confident, and have better classroom management techniques.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, studies suggest that beginning teachers who are mentored have greater self-confidence, improved job satisfaction, a heightened rate of success and effectiveness, and an increased commitment to the school organization as a whole.<sup>12</sup>

Beginning educators who have disabilities may have additional challenges to face besides those commonly experienced by new teachers, challenges that are then extended to mentoring programs provided to support them. Are initial difficulties the result of their novice situation, their disabilities, or a combination of the two? What kinds of modifications, adaptations, accommodations, or resources can assist them in handling any difficulties their disabilities may present in an educational context? Mentors who are experienced educators, either with disabilities themselves or without disabilities but with extensive experience advocating for and supporting educators with disabilities, can be a strong resource to provide disability-related support to new teachers with disabilities. This is the premise of the national Educators with Disabilities Caucus Mentoring Program.

## **The Educators with Disabilities Caucus**

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) has long had an interest in promoting the teaching profession to individuals with disabilities. In 1992, the CEC’s President, the late Ron Anderson, appointed a presidential commission on special educators with disabilities to examine the issues affecting special educators with disabilities and make recommendations to the organization to improve opportunities. At the 1996 annual convention, the representative assembly acted on the work of the commission by adopting a resolution that directed the association to take a leadership role on the issues facing educators with disabilities, as follows:

- Clearly and unambiguously present the message through its words and actions at all organizational levels that education professions are open to individuals with disabilities;
- Discuss the issues involved in the recruitment, preparation, employment, and retention of educators with disabilities more widely with other organizations and the general public along with recommended solutions to the issues;

- Build the coalition of organizations and agencies needed to improve opportunities for current and prospective educators with disabilities; and
- Use the size and strength of the Council for Exceptional Children to effect changes that will provide such opportunities.<sup>13</sup>

In 1996, the Educators with Disabilities Network was developed. The National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education, a federally funded project that was located at the CEC, assumed responsibility and management of the network. Through 2001, the clearinghouse published and distributed materials about the network, developed and hosted its website, created a listserve, and maintained the membership list. However, the network lacked status for advocacy within the CEC. Its placement within the clearinghouse also limited its capacity to establish a national voice and presence. In 2002, clearinghouse staff and some of the original organizers of the network discussed the philosophical and technical issues involved in moving it from a loose, somewhat hidden network to the status of a more high profile caucus within the CEC. During the convention that year, the network held a general meeting to consider the development of a caucus within the CEC, and the turnout was overwhelming. Educators, with and without disabilities, and preservice teachers with disabilities from various backgrounds across the country attended. With the momentum of that meeting, a board of directors for the newly formed Educators with Disabilities Caucus was established, and the clearinghouse began to make plans to transfer the responsibility and management of the group to its own members.

In February 2003, the clearinghouse used email and regular mail to inform all network members that the Educators with Disabilities Network was being dissolved, and they were encouraged to join the Educators with Disabilities Caucus. The membership list housed at the clearinghouse was removed in July 2003, and a caucus codirector developed a new caucus membership list. The network website was reconfigured to show the change in name and status of the group. The purpose of the caucus is to provide a formal means for members to suggest, advise, and advocate within the CEC and monitor the organization's policies and actions regarding educators with disabilities. The group also acts a resource and network for educators with disabilities as well as those who work with them.<sup>14</sup> One of the major means by which it does this is through its mentoring program.

### **The Educators with Disabilities Caucus Mentoring Program**

From the inception of the caucus, it was felt that a mentoring program for educators with disabilities should be a major component. As for all educators, collaboration is crucial for educators with disabilities. For some individuals with disabilities, however, positive collaborative experiences may be hindered by hidden or even overt disabilities. Providing individuals who are experiencing problems in this area with mentors who have encountered similar situations or are familiar with circumstances facing these individuals is an invaluable resource. Many caucus members themselves have disabilities and have overcome obstacles to become successful professors, educators, and administrators.

The primary focus of the mentoring services is to provide the support of experienced educators with disabilities to preservice educators with disabilities through a period of transition into their careers in education, support that can complement the kinds of assistance that university student support services provide to students with disabilities. Both potential mentors and mentees must submit an application

to the caucus.<sup>15</sup> The caucus mentoring program is designed to begin upon a student's admission to a teacher preparation program to assist students through coursework, internships, and student teaching, and then to continue as the educators with disabilities transition into their own classrooms. An important emphasis of the caucus mentoring services during this transition period is self-advocacy. The caucus established a list of guidelines and responsibilities for mentoring teams participating in the program and piloted the first mentoring partnerships during the 2002-2003 school year. To date, the numbers of individuals participating in the mentoring project has grown from three mentor pairs in the states of Florida and North Carolina to over 20 pairings throughout the nation. Information concerning the first three mentoring partnerships is presented below.

#### *Mentoring Teams*

All of the pilot mentees were in graduate programs and were given the opportunity to help select their own mentors. As a result, two teams were composed of individuals both of whom had documented disabilities, and one team was composed of a mentee with a disability and a mentor without a disability. One team's mentor was a tenured educator with a learning disability. This individual had over twelve years of experience as an educator and was paired with an educator with cerebral palsy who had just returned to graduate school. The mentee had been released from his previous job as an educator and was returning to school to pursue his Master's degree in another area of education. The mentor of the second team was a tenured educator without a disability. This individual was selected by the mentee who had requested the mentor when she was approached about participating in the pilot study. The mentee was an educator with three years of experience pursuing a Master's degree in special education. She was diagnosed with learning disabilities in reading and written expression as well as attention deficit hyperactive disorder and used a wheelchair. In the third team, the mentor was an individual with cerebral palsy who had 25 years of experience teaching special education. The mentee, a graduate school student pursuing her Master's degree and teaching certification, had several issues with severe gait ataxia and tremors, seizures, polyarthralgias, severe arthritis, asthma, and Dupuytren contractures. Additionally, her fibromyalgia caused her to experience short-term memory loss.

#### *Collecting Information About the Mentoring Partnerships*

Data were collected throughout the implementation of the mentoring program to guide the efforts of the caucus; address what needs to be continued; what needs to be changed within the program; and provide groundwork for the future. Members of all teams were encouraged to establish consistent, scheduled contact with each other and to use telephone calls and email for situations that arose outside of the planned contacts. Time logs of each contact and field notes were the primary sources of data obtained during this phase of the program. All data were obtained over the course of two semesters, a span of six months. At the completion of the pilot year, the chairs of the mentoring program analyzed the information to identify common issues across the teams and make suggestions for improvements to the program.

#### *Information from the Mentoring Partnerships*

All three mentoring teams addressed two issues from the mentees' perspectives. First, mentees felt that the accommodations that they used to participate in classes in graduate school were affecting the learning of others. For instance, the noises made by their Alpha

Smart communication devices, the keyboarding required for note-taking, and repeated clarifications and questions could be distracting to others in their classes. Second, accessibility was a concern across the teams. The physical characteristics of the buildings in which they were educated, e.g., the locations of ramps, automatic doors, and sheltered walkways, could, at times, be inconvenient. The two mentees who used wheelchairs also reported that their physical disabilities hindered their participation in group activities and affected their stamina during classes.

Distance was an issue noted by mentors when the members of a partnership were not geographically close. In one situation, distance was the variable that determined the difference between immediate and delayed support. This, in turn, caused the mentor to become frustrated with the amount of time it took to provide support as well as the communications methods, telephone calls and email messages. Although the time-consuming nature of providing services was felt to be distance-related by one mentor, the other two mentors noted that providing support for mentees simply took a lot of time. For instance, helping a mentee establish and use a support system within the framework of his or her educational environment is a challenging task regardless of the distance.

All of the participants in the piloting, though, were thankful for the availability of email and telephone calls for timely contact as problems did occur between the mentors' and mentees' scheduled contacts. All of the mentees were grateful for outside support. Two explained that it was much easier to deal with the stresses of school knowing that there was a person to help them process problems and, even more importantly, work on processes to prevent issues related to their disabilities from occurring. Moreover, mentees who were working in educational settings were thankful for having someone outside of their educational environment for mentoring purposes. Both mentees and mentors in the situation in which distance was a factor felt that support, regardless of the location, was better than having no outside support at all. Finally, and importantly, all of the mentees in the pilot effort of the caucus mentoring program are still in their current positions in school or work.

### Consider the Caucus Mentoring Program

Teaching one's own classroom in a school creates many challenges for new educators; doing so with a disability can add yet another set of tests. What if the educator needs help with the physical act of writing? How could she ask for help without other staff members feeling uncomfortable or sorry for her? How could she establish her own support system in her school? She may be spending hours on paperwork because she feels she has to physically do it by herself. With the assistance of a program like the caucus mentoring project for educators with disabilities and the support of her school administrator, she may be able to think of possible accommodations, advocate for her needs, and act upon a solution.

The insights gained from similar experiences are a critical first step in helping new educators with disabilities become successful, insights that are not always present in other school, district, or state mentoring programs. One of the codirectors of the piloting effort stated it this way:

One member of a mentoring team was already involved in another mentoring program. However, she felt more comfortable participating in the caucus mentoring program. I feel that it was simply because the mentor understood the additional

issues that face the educator with a disability in the classroom as well as in the continuing studies at the university level that were occurring at that time... One important support that the caucus mentoring program offers beginning educators with disabilities is the option of choosing to not disclose a specific disability, but at the same time, having appropriate supports in place. Because of this, beginning educators with disabilities have two support systems through their individual schools and the caucus. One support system, the school system, is to help with district procedures. And the caucus provides another avenue to help manage the personal issues that come up with having a disability in the classroom.

School and district leaders provide the next step that helps educators with disabilities. The knowledge that educators with disabilities and their advocacy efforts are supported by administrators empowers them in their careers, for their own good and the good of all of their students.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Richard Ingersoll and Thomas Smith, "Do Teacher Induction and Mentoring Matter?," *NASSP Bulletin* 88 (March 2004): 28.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Ingersoll and Thomas Smith, "The Wrong Solution to the Teacher Shortage," *Educational Leadership* 60 (May 2003): 30-33.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Dollase, *Voices of Beginning Teachers: Visions and Realities* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992); Scott Veenman, "Perceived Problems of Beginning Teachers," *Review of Educational Research* 54 (1984): 143-178; Lou Huling-Austin, "Teacher Induction Programs and Internships," in *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*, ed. W. R. Houston, (Reston, VA: Association of Teacher Educators, 1990), 535-548; John Sears, James Marshall, and Ann Otis-Wilborn, *The Exceptional Teacher's Handbook: The First-Year Special Education Teacher's Guide for Success* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 1994); Susan Whitaker, "What Do First-Year Special Education Teachers Need?," *Teaching Exceptional Children* 33 (Sept.-Oct. 2000): 28-36.

<sup>4</sup> Sears et al., *The Exceptional Teacher's Handbook*; Whitaker, "What Do First-Year Special Education Teachers Need?"

<sup>5</sup> Whitaker, "What Do First-Year Special Education Teachers Need?"

<sup>6</sup> Ingersoll and Smith, "The Wrong Solution to the Teacher Shortage."

<sup>7</sup> Susan Odell, "Induction Support of New Teachers: A Functional Approach," *Journal of Teacher Education* 37, no. 1 (1986): 26-29.

<sup>8</sup> Ingersoll and Smith, "Do Teacher Induction and Mentoring Matter?" The first type would be structured to be developmental and foster growth for beginning teachers while the other would serve as an assessment tool for determining if new professionals are adequately prepared for a career in teaching.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Ingersoll and John Kralik, *A Review of Empirical Research on the Effects of Teacher Mentoring Programs in Elementary and Secondary Schools* (Denver, CO: The Education Commission of the States, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Whitaker, "What Do First-Year Special Education Teachers Need?"

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Clayton E. Keller, Christine C. Givner, and Dianne Raeke Ferrell, "Policies and Practices Within Professional Organizations," in *Enhancing Diversity: Educators with Disabilities*, ed. Ronald J. Anderson, Clayton E. Keller, and Joan M. Karp, (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1998), 260.

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.cec.sped.org/diversity/edc.html> for more information about the EDC.

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.cec.sped.org/diversity/edc.html#3> for an application.

# New Rules, New Roles: Technology Standards and Teacher Education

Becky Pasco and Phyllis G. Adcock

The digital age is infiltrating colleges of education around the country, but while some faculty are jumping on the bandwagon and working hard to improve their own technological literacy and that of their students, other faculty are resistant, afraid that technology may “dehumanize” education. School districts around the country are investing millions of dollars in technology, but “...these investments are of little value unless the schools can employ teachers who are capable of making sound judgments about the use of technology and are able to employ it skillfully.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the technological literacy of faculty in teacher preparation programs is of high interest to administrators and teachers in K-12 schools who want to be able to assure parents that their children will receive relevant and meaningful instruction in a variety of innovative formats including technology. This article discusses two national initiatives which encourage or require colleges of education to increase teacher candidates’ technological literacy followed by a discussion of the impact of technology integration on teacher practice.

## National Initiatives: Expectations for Colleges of Education

Students in today’s K-12 schools are growing up in a rapidly changing world and need to develop a multitude of literacies, including technological literacy, to function effectively in their dynamic personal and academic environments. If students are to attain these literacies, colleges of education need to produce teacher candidates who know how to use technology effectively as a classroom tool to enhance learning.

Since 1993, the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) has produced a list of standards that outlines what prospective teachers should know about and be able to do with technology, and has urged faculty in teacher preparation programs to provide opportunities for teacher candidates to meet these standards. The 2002 ISTE National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers (NETS•T) are composed of 23 indicators for teacher candidates in the following six categories: (1) Technology operations and concepts; (2) planning and designing learning environments and experiences; (3) teaching, learning, and curriculum; (4) assessment and evaluation; (5) productivity and professional practice; and (6) social, ethical, legal, and human issues.

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**Becky Pasco is Associate Professor in the Teacher Education Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Phyllis G. Adcock is Associate Professor in the Teacher Education Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.**

In 2002, National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) developed professional standards for the accreditation of schools, colleges, and departments of education which include a more rigorous focus on technology. NCATE requires evidence that they are producing candidates who “know and understand information technology in order to use it in working effectively with students and professional colleagues in the (1) delivery, development, prescription, and assessment of instruction; (2) problem solving; (3) school and classroom administration; (4) educational research; (5) electronic information access and exchange; and (6) personal and professional productivity.”<sup>2</sup>

Standards such as these play a significant role in establishing program priorities, but the use of technology by teacher preparation faculty has been found to vary significantly among programs. Grabe and Grabe pose three reasons for the variation:

First, colleges of education frequently have no better equipment than K-12 institutions do and only a limited inventory of the types of instructional software used in K-12 classrooms. Second, a large number of college faculty members are unable to make appropriate use of technology in their own classrooms or are unwilling to try because of their own lack of preparations, anxiety, or disinterest. And third, the teacher preparation curriculum typically confines experiences with technology to a single course, and one that concentrates on learning to use the technology rather than how to facilitate learning with technology.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, according to a survey conducted by Grabe and Grabe, only one third of teacher candidates felt either “very well prepared” or “well prepared” to integrate technology in their classrooms.<sup>4</sup>

## Discussion: New Roles for Teachers and Teacher Preparation Faculty

As teachers and teacher preparation faculty search for ways to integrate technology successfully into the curriculum, they have found themselves in a position of re-examining their roles and identity.<sup>5</sup> How teachers use computers is usually based on their beliefs about how students learn and the roles of teachers and the students in a learning environment.<sup>6</sup> Faculty are used to being in control of their environments and course content. The traditional nature of the classroom where the teacher is the “leader of learning,” makes the teacher the center of the learning activity. This traditional approach makes the learners passive and therefore the “follower of the leader.”<sup>7</sup> In classrooms that integrate technology successfully, the teacher is often not the center of learning but a facilitator of the learning activities. The teacher takes on a role, similar to a coach, as he or she moves from student to student to assist in the student-centered learning that is going on.<sup>8</sup>

There are currently many types of technology that afford faculty members new instructional opportunities. These technologies support active learning systems with hardware, software and networks that enable “anytime, anywhere” access to resources and asynchronous instruction where students can engage in content and with colleagues at different times and in different sites. Faculty who successfully integrate these types of technology into their coursework are less often concerned as to whether students get the “right” answer than they are in “how they got the answer.” According to Chickering and Ehrmann:

Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write reflectively about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves.<sup>9</sup>

The use of technology provides another way for faculty to engage students in active learning and discussions where information is "...not presented to the students in a final, distilled form" but where students "...pull together bits and pieces of information from several sources, gather data, generate personal interpretations and summaries and make decisions."<sup>10</sup> These types of learning activities are designed to make learning more authentic and to be an interactive exchange of ideas where the learning environment moves from a traditional subject-centered approach, to a more student-centered approach. This transition is often facilitated by a cooperative learning strategy which involves more complex tasks and materials that are now being incorporated into learning by computers.

Not everyone is convinced that technology enhances teaching and learning. Cuban et al. suggest that computers have made a smaller impact than what is claimed because teachers are using computers for lower level skills, such as word processing and email communications... and "...that these changes maintain rather than alter existing classroom practices."<sup>11</sup> In these situations, the naysayers are correct, and faculty need to carefully choose the technology that will support and improve specific instructional strategies. "For any given instruction strategy, some technologies are better than others: Better to turn in a screw with a screwdriver than a hammer – a dime may also do the trick, but the screwdriver is usually better."<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

Over the last 20 years, school districts around the country have made major strides in increasing student access to computers and the Internet.<sup>13</sup> As a consequence, most of today's teacher candidates will find themselves in K-12 classrooms where technology is present. Faculty in colleges of education must model the integration of technology into the curriculum to effectively prepare teacher candidates to do so in K-12 classrooms.<sup>14</sup> However, one cannot assume if schools are wired and have the necessary hardware and software, that a widespread use of technology by teachers will occur. By the same token, just because a faculty member acquires technology skills, it does not mean she or he can integrate technology into classroom instruction effectively. In many cases, faculty are learning right along with their students about the opportunities of computer-based learning, and this requires a great deal of commitment and energy. Not surprisingly, teachers (and especially teacher candidates) find it difficult to prepare to learn and teach new content while also learning new methodology in computer-based learning.<sup>15</sup>

Faculty need support for the use of technology in learning, and more opportunities to view colleagues who use technology effectively to encourage teacher candidates to use and experiment with computers as tools for learning.<sup>16</sup> Studies have shown that preservice teachers' confidence in their technology skills is directly related to how well they feel they were prepared to use technology in their teaching.<sup>17</sup> It is apparent therefore that teacher preparation programs have a responsibility in helping preservice, novice, and inservice teachers to learn to integrate technology into the curriculum effectively.

If colleges of education do not prepare teachers who can use technology to enhance K-12 students' personal and academic lives, they do so at their students' expense. According to Mehlinger and Powers, "Not to know what technology is available to assist children educationally, and not to use it thoughtfully, is evidence of instructional malpractice."<sup>18</sup> Faculty and teachers need to take advantage of all tools that enhance instruction and thus better prepare their students to deal with the complex world in which we live.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Howard D. Mehlinger and Susan Powers, *Technology and Teacher Education: A Guide for Educators and Policymakers* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), ix.

<sup>2</sup> NCATE, *Glossary of NCATE Terms* (1997-2004), <http://www.ncate.org/search/glossary.htm>, 57.

<sup>3</sup> Mike Grabe and Cindy Grabe, *Integrating Technology for Meaningful Learning* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 22.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Windschitl and Kurt Sahl, "Tracing Teachers' Use of Technology in a Laptop Computer School: The Interplay of Teacher Beliefs, Social Dynamics, and Institutional Culture," *American Educational Research Journal* 39 (Spring 2002): 168.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>8</sup> Larry Cuban, Heather Kirkpatrick, and Craig Peck, "High Access and Low Use of Technologies in High School Classrooms: Explaining an Apparent Paradox," *American Educational Research Journal* 38 (Winter 2001): 824; Windschitl and Sahl, "Tracing Teachers' Use," 169.

<sup>9</sup> Arthur Chickering and Stephan Ehrmann, "Implementing the Seven Principles: Technology as Lever," <http://www.aahe.org/technology/ehtmann.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> Grabe and Grabe, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Cuban et al., 815, 817.

<sup>12</sup> Chickering and Ehrmann, "Implementing the Seven Principles."

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Yiping Lou, Philip C. Abrami, and Sylvia d'Apollonia, "Small Group and Individual Learning with Technology: A Meta-Analysis," *Review of Educational Research* 71 (Fall 2001): 449-521. Yiping et al. found the ratio of students to computers had dropped from 125 students per computer in 1984, to a ratio of 10 students per computer in 2001. See also, Cuban, et al. 813-834. While in 1994, only 35% of high schools were connected to the internet, by 1999, it had increased to 90%.

<sup>14</sup> While this article has cited a number of research studies, we caution readers that the utilization of the results of studies concerning the use of technology in teaching and learning environments is made difficult by continual changes and innovations in hardware and software landscapes; increasingly diverse student bodies; and wide disparities in educational funding.

<sup>15</sup> Joy Wallace, "The Digital Equity Toolkit: A Guide for Educators Who Want to Integrate Email and the Internet Into Their Classroom or Project," [http://www.nici-mc2.org/de\\_toolkit](http://www.nici-mc2.org/de_toolkit).

<sup>16</sup> Windschitl and Sahl, 200.

<sup>17</sup> Heidi Stevenson-Bagnall and David Pratt. "Crossing the Chasm from Technology Training to Integration: How Do We Reach the Other Side?" Proceedings of the 13th International SITE Conference, Nashville, Tennessee (Spring 2001), 1421.

<sup>18</sup> Mehlinger and Powers, 12.

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