

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

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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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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

<sup>1</sup> We gratefully acknowledge the ongoing support of the Thorn River Foundation since the very beginning of this long-term follow-up research. In addition, we thank University Research Council, DePaul University, and Northern Illinois University for their support in conducting this follow-up study. We also acknowledge our gratitude to Karen Scaife Burgess and Amy Bauer, research assistants, without whose expertise this project could not have been conducted. Lastly, we are grateful to the participants who willingly shared details of their lives that at times were painful to discuss and at other times exhilarating. We and future generations of individuals with learning disabilities are all the beneficiaries of their generosity.

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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.