

Running Head: STUDENT VOICES

Documenting Student's Voices: What Role Did Being Labeled as a
Student Entitled to Special Education Services Have in a Minority Youth's Life?

Cheri D. Melancon-Whitehead

Chapman University

INTRODUCTION

Interviewer: “What is your definition of special education?”

Maria: “My definition is that it’s nothing more than just a little bit of extra help and a gentle push forward.”

Student voices do not fill the research literature in the United States. There is significant investigation done in the area of learning disabilities and the stigma that is created by labeling students as qualifying for special education services; however, it is rare to hear directly from young scholars about their status if they have exceptional needs. Cook-Sather (2003) commented, “Missing from the discussion [in the educational community] are student perspectives on learning, learning differences, and their experiences of both” (p. 22). Further, according to Cook-Sather (2007), work against negating and eliminating student voice is grounded in “the liberatory intentions of critical pedagogies . . . [and] poststructural feminist critiques” (p. 390) is being driven by a vision seeking social justice and a transformation of oppression against students. It is through revealing the experiences of students told with their own voices that we help them come to “an understanding of their own power as knowers and creators of their world [providing them a vehicle to be] potential transformers of their world” (Weiler, 1991, p. 463) It is important that educators are purposeful in assisting those individuals who fall within the federal mandate for qualifying for services have a positive experience without a lingering stigma of being less than their typical peers.

My research questions explored the experiences students with a learning disability encountered in high school. There were numerous questions that guided this study. I wanted to determine how a student felt about being labeled as a student with a disability during high school and whether experiences had an impact on academic endeavors and social status. I wanted to find out student opinion about the rigor of the academic instruction they had received in high school

and how their secondary education had an impact on their adult competency? Further, I wanted to determine if students believed the quantity and types of special education services they received while in school were adequate or lacking and whether or not educators they encountered provided academic instruction and support for their specific needs. When students had memorable social or academic experiences from high school, I wanted to ascertain if these incidents were related in some way to their status of having special needs and receiving services for their disability. Most important, I wanted to know what students thought about being afforded special education services and whether they choose to keep that information from peers. In regard to parent and family influence, I wanted to understand how this factor might have influenced their school experience. Most critically, I wanted to learn beliefs and attitudes about special education services? These inquiries are critical in understanding how educational staff can help students navigate through high school and benefit from receiving services for their specific disabilities.

Theoretical Framework

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989; UN General Assembly Resolution 44/25) gives children a right of participation that includes the right to express their views, to be heard, and to take part in decisions. Habermas (1972) theorized that critical theory is the basis for specific knowledge students hold that afford them a specific form of knowledge that leads to self-reflection and emancipation. Rudduck and Fielding (2006) noted that useful historical information founded on student voice demonstrates a commitment to their participation and puts an individual critically central to his or her education. The foundational premise in student voice proposes a dialogue between student and the educational system that is essential in creating an effective, meaningful, and robust learning environment. Allowing student voice is the

realization that student participation creates democratic inclusivity (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). Allowing students to have a voice acknowledges the need to remediate the unequal and problematic relationship between the student and educational staff. The establishment of a dialogue between student and educator holds the possibility for change and transformation within the academic arena. Thus, when student voice is active, relational, and dynamic, it promotes young people to be active participants in their own learning. Including student voice in the educational process begins with the recognition that power occupies all social communication and, as a result, distinctive cultural groups have differential access to institutional power (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1965, the U.S. Congress passed the first federal law to assist in the education of children with disabilities in 1965, P.L. 89-313. This law amended Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to include the provision of financial assistance to State operated or supported schools for handicapped children (Triano, 2000). Included in the definition of 'handicapped children' were individuals diagnosed as being mentally retarded, hard of hearing, deaf, speech impaired, visually handicapped, seriously emotionally disturbed, crippled or other health impaired. It also included in that legislation were "children with specific learning disabilities to the extent that such children are health impaired" (Education Policy Research Institute, 1976).

Federal legislation titled All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, later renamed Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), was passed requiring public schools to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to all eligible children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE) appropriate to individual needs. IDEA further requires public

school systems to develop appropriate Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for each child. In fact, according to Triano (2000), “IDEA calls for the provision of “special education and related services” for a “child with a disability (as defined by Section 300.7), who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services” (para. 15) The specific special education and related services outlined in each IEP reflect the individualized needs of each student to their individual needs. IDEA requires public school systems to develop appropriate Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for each child. The specific special education and related services outlined in each IEP reflect the individualized needs of each student (A Guide to Disability Rights Laws, 2005). Having the label of being ‘learning disabled’ “establishes accommodation eligibility and civil rights protection” (Ho, 2004, p. 86).

The diagnosis of most learning disabilities is based solely on two criteria: the observation of academic work and the performance on selective psychological tests. A person’s brain [neurological] dysfunction is not proven through this process; rather, it is only inferred “by a process of elimination . . . if no other cause” (Zuriff, 1996, p. 395) for a child’s unexpected school performance is found. It is a process of assuming a biological basis for learning difficulties, rather than a problem or decrease in cognitive function, i.e., children with learning disabilities are “thought to have problems in the psychological processes needed for academic success, not in their basic intelligence” (Zuriff, 1996, p. 395).

A specific learning disability is a condition that is unique to each person and these traits fall within four broad types. An individual who is diagnosed with a specific learning disability (SLD) is generally of average or above-average intelligence and shows a pronounced lack of achievement given an age and ability level, i.e., a marked discrepancy between achievement and intellect. Because an observer witnesses only the visible input and output that results from the

processing of information, an individual with an SLD is often deemed to be lazy or simply unwilling to try hard enough. SLDs involve four broad categories of traits including spoken language (listening and speaking), written language (reading, writing, and spelling), arithmetic (calculation and concepts), and reasoning (organization and integration of ideas and thoughts) and is manifested in gradients ranging from mild to severe (University of Washington, 2010).

There are numerous realities that accompany the labeling of students for special education services. First and foremost, according to Ho (2004), is that the label of having a learning disability may help the individual, their parents, and teachers understand and cope with the condition and assist in identifying aid that can help the student. Ho (2004) noted that being entitled to special education services could be a legal avenue to provide various beneficial services, protections, and accommodations that may give some students the additional help they need to level the playing field in the classroom. Additionally, a label can set up an individual for discrimination, because a student is set apart from typical peers without regard to the fact that people develop at varying rates. Labeling a student in a school setting may be problematic, because most teachers are not trained in how to teach students of multiple backgrounds who may need a variety of instructional approaches (Ho, 2004).

Lauchlan and Boyle (2007) discussed the value of labeling students according to criteria that describes their disability or learning challenges. These researchers note that a label can serve to identify specific interventions that facilitate learning and can “be a supportive resource for parents and children (and perhaps some teachers).” (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007, p. 41). There are, however, multiple significant negative ramifications of placing a label on a child that can include: the validity and reliability of the test instruments that determine handicapping conditions; the ambiguity in the definition of certain labels (such as dyslexia and Asperser’s

Syndrome); teasing, taunting, and bullying from peers that create negative self-images; a life-long association for an individual that is solely based on a disability that has the potential to lead to discrimination. Lauchlan & Boyle (2007) noted that “stigmatization; bullying; reduced opportunities in life; a focus within-child deficits to the exclusion of other, often more significant factors [such as environmental factors]: misclassification; and lowered expectations about what a ‘labeled’ child can achieve.” (p. 41) are also risks associated with labeling. The value of labeling needs to be determined by the opportunities their application provides to the individual.

It is particularly problematic to attach a stigma to people with disabilities. Rauscher and McClintock (1996) described *ableism* as

A pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion that oppresses people who have mental, emotional and physical disabilities. . . . Deeply rooted beliefs about health, productivity, beauty, and the value of human life, perpetuated by the public and private media, combine to create an environment that is often hostile to those whose physical, mental, cognitive, and sensory abilities . . . fall out of the scope of what is currently defined as socially acceptable. (p. 198)

Simply stated, ableism is the belief that it is better not to have a disability and that it is superior to accomplish tasks in the way that nondisabled people do (Rauscher & McClintock, 1996; Storey, 2007). “The ideology of ableism promotes the notion that it is better to be as “normal” as possible rather than be disabled, or different (e.g., speak languages other than English, come from non-Anglo heritages).” (Draxton, Radley, & Murphy, 2011, p. 7). Ableism is similar to other types of discrimination (e.g., racial, ethnic, gender, age,) but is often unrecognized as an important issue or one that even exists (Johnson, 2003). “An ableist perspective considers “disability” to be a personal condition that must be corrected or cured through accommodations,

interventions, and/or segregation” (Draxton, Radley, & Murphy, 2011).

Although schools often advocate multiculturalism and acceptance of differences, disability and ableism are overlooked in this advocacy. Ableism is similar to other types of discrimination (e.g., racial, ethnic, gender, age), but is often unrecognized as an important issue or one that even exists (Johnson, 2003). According to Storey (2007), disabilities have been divided into categories according to a label (e.g., severe disabilities, learning disabilities, physical disabilities). Each of these labels are influenced by political, cultural, and economic developments aligned to “ableism.” Current cultural norms have ignored the fundamental ableism bias by accepting as truth that if students learn new skills and become equal to their non-disabled peers, the prejudice against people with disabilities will be equalized. However, it is within the context of these larger issues that the influence of society is often resistant to the change (Draxton, Radley, & Murphy, 2011).

METHODS

This pilot study used interviews to elicit the voices of two students who have been identified as having a disability. I probed their memories of their high school experiences to uncover how they felt about their education, their social position, and how the label of having a learning disability affected who they are and whether it figured into their post-secondary life. I reviewed the cover page of each participant’s IEP that was in place during his or her high school career to verify the ‘handicapping’ diagnosis documented in that record.

Insider Research

The lens that a qualitative researcher uses to determine the validity of her work involves a critical perspective of her own narrative regarding the “social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender antecedents of the studied situations” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126). It is

important to acknowledge and describe that through self-disclosure certain assumptions, “personal beliefs, values, and biases . . . may shape inquiry” (p.127). However, according to Creswell and Miller (2000), validity of insider research comes with a researcher’s increased time spent in the research arena, i.e., “more . . . pluralistic perspectives will be heard from participants and the better the understanding of the context of participants’ views” (p.128). “Understanding human experience is the heart of human experience.” (Dial, 2005, p. 8). My assignment as an educational professional grounds and involves me in this educational domain and from there I seek to have students share their perspectives and make their experiences known.

Personal Subjectivity Statement

I am an educator. My life is dedicated to teaching and empowering students. It is my responsibility to ensure each child receives the excellent education to which he or she is entitled to by birth and to purposely assist him or her to reach personal potential. I understand the struggles and triumphs that living bestows upon our youth and given the norm for most families in the dense minority urban community where I teach. I am painfully aware of how poverty robs my students of hope. Everyday I see the effects of being a marginalized member of a low socio-economic Hispanic community. Working with adolescents, I witness first-hand the issues that confront young people in their quest to grow to adulthood today, and I am willing to stand with them throughout their journey.

Perspective and Researcher Role

My perspective in this research is from the inside. I am a teacher at a large comprehensive, traditional public high school in an urban city whose demographics include a large majority of Hispanic citizens and is ranked as being low socioeconomic. I work with students beginning in ninth grade and very often maintain contact with a student through and

beyond their secondary school career. Most of my work involves students with Individual Education Plans, and I have direct responsibility for a student's education when they are enrolled in my class and when they are in my caseload. It is my responsibility to collaborate with all teachers on campus so that I can actively secure their academic and social success.

I grew up and attended public school in an adjoining city and have been a member of this suburban community for over four decades. I have lived through transformation of this county from rural to urban along with the changes in demographics and educational paradigms throughout that time. I have worked with individuals with special needs for that same amount of time. I know firsthand the dichotomy of wealth and majority/minority status for the population that lives within these communities.

Method of Inquiry

Conducting personal interviews was the method of inquiry most appropriate for my research. Interviews allowed me to gain information about the participants' past and current personal histories, their school careers, their journeys as students with IEPs, and their academic and social experiences.

Interview Protocol and Invitation to the Study

Through my ongoing communication with former students from whom I had been given contact information, I asked several students to participate in this study. Two students in the local community who were able to make the time for the interview(s) and also connect with me personally within the timeframe at a mutually agreed upon location were selected for participation.

Throughout the interview process, I viewed myself as a student who was learning from the participants, and my goal was to discover as much as possible about their current lives,

educational experiences, and their view of being identified as qualifying for special education services. I felt that I was knowledgeable about their circumstances during their high school years and prepared myself with open-ended questions elicit from each respondent his or her history, insight, and personal views.

Research Participants

Jose

Jose is a young adult finishing his second year of college. He could be described as driven, focused, an athlete (wrestler), able to rise to a challenge, a protector, a helper, responsible, and fairly serious. He is the second born in a family of five. Each of his siblings has a different father. He has been the oldest child living with his mother since before his freshman year. Jose has had many personal trials that I am aware of—and I am sure there have been many more difficulties of which I am unaware. What I know about this student follows: Jose says that he has never known his father. His grandfather, who was a pivotal person in his life, died several years ago. Since Jose's birth, his mother has had serial boyfriends who were all allowed to live in the family home. He arrived in high school with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) in auditory processing and memory sensory motor.

Specific Learning Disability" means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations. Auditory processing difficulties include "the ability to hear auditory messages, distinguish between similar sounds or words, separate relevant speech from background noise, and the ability to recall and comprehend what was heard). Memory deficits involve the ability to retrieve or recognize information one has experienced and carried forward in time.

Initially, he was a quiet student during his high school years and grew to be more confident and outgoing as he matured during his high school experience. One day during his freshman year, he came to tell me that “The war is over.” He related that his mother’s live-in boyfriend had been physically abusing his mother, and Jose had stood between his mother and the man to prevent further violence. The police were called to come to the apartment, and the man was arrested. In Jose’s sophomore year, he had a period when his thinking was very dark—the song lyrics he wrote, the pictures he drew, and the statements he made were focused on death and suicide. Jose was provided access to mental health services throughout this period of crisis. In October of his junior year, he shared that his family had been homeless for four months since the previous summer and that they had lived behind a garage in an alley. Jose did not tell me this until his mother had found an apartment to move into. During his senior year, Jose had to retake a large number of classes that he had initially failed. He was able to make up his credits and graduated from high school with a diploma. Subsequent to that success, he enrolled in community college. He has received a financial aid that pays for his tuition and books. He recently was able to become employed and is helping himself and family survive financially. Jose is the first child in his immediate and extended family to attend college. He has goals for his future, i.e., to transfer to a four-year college and to sponsor his mother to gain the legal right to be in the United States.

Maria

Maria is now twenty-two years old and has a four-month old baby. Maria, the father of her child (also a former student with an IEP who attended the same secondary institution), and her infant in her parents’ home, along with her four younger siblings. The three of them occupy the living room space of a two-bedroom apartment. There are ten people living together in that

space. She is the oldest of six children. Maria keeps both her own, her partner's, and their baby's clothes and other possessions in buckets in the living room. She is best described as being responsible, independent, and somewhat fragile. Her fragility is due to health issues and fear of not having the legal right to be in this country. Medical specialists have advised her to be on medication for her anxiety; however, her mother is adamant that she not have any prescriptions for anxiety, because "only crazy people" take those kinds of medications.

Maria transitioned to high school with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) in auditory processing. She received counseling services while in high school. While in high school, she performed well in all her classes and graduated. For multiple years, she served as the president and leader of a student club. She repeatedly chose needy bad boys for relationships. She attended a local community college for several semesters and one of her former high school teachers paid for her tuition and books, because she was not eligible for financial aid. She stopped attending college a couple years ago when she became pregnant and subsequently miscarried.

Limitations

The results from this pilot study are extremely limited because the two students who participated successfully graduated from high school and continued to seek more education; whereas students who had completed high school, but did not complete all requirements and earn a high school diploma, were not included and may have a different perspective.. These findings cannot be generalized to the greater population of all students who have had IEPs in high school because there is a tremendous variety of student circumstances that would need to be included in a larger study. Research to contrast the views and experiences of students with disabilities and

those who have not been identified as having one is necessary. Further, the timeframe during which the information was collected was brief.

Ethical concerns

As an individual who has been involved continuously in the lives of the participants in this research, there is some risk that these young adults would feel compelled to please the researcher by couching responses in a such a way as not to hurt or disillusion her. It is my opinion, however, that as an educator who has had years of honest, direct dialogue with the participants I would note that the disclosures, as always in the past, were honest. These relationships have evolved from ‘teacher/mentor-student’ to ‘adult advisor/mentor-maturing young adult’ and are mutually reciprocal and beneficial. The raw circumstances of our history has demanded honesty so that issues could be brought to light and subsequently addressed. In reality, there are few secrets in a high school student community.

Data Analysis

The data for this research were recorded interviews that were subsequently transcribed into Microsoft Word documents. The Word.doc transcript files were analyzed by managing the data through reading and making memos in those files and by color coding and in bolding student responses to help in describing, classifying, and interpreting the data. I attempted to use the computer software program ATLAS.ti; however, after communicating with that company’s (Scientific Software Development) technical assistance staff, I was informed that the application does not run on Apple Computer operating systems.

DISCUSSION

Appreciation of Services Provided

The study explored the history of two students who attended and completed high school. Each of these individuals participating in this pilot study earned a high school diploma from a traditional high school with a long legacy in the community. Each of the students went on to attend community college, and both have aspirations of acquiring higher education to improve their lives.

The findings from this research showed that these students did not have a negative experience when they were labeled as students with special needs. Instead, they reported that they had benefited from the instruction and services that educators provided them with throughout their educational lives. Students shared that they were not negatively stigmatized by having a label that declared their differences and that having individualized instruction tailored to their specific needs was transformative in their lives. The students were appreciative for specific interventions to remedy their learning issues. Clearly, the participants in this study found that having an IEP and there were educators who worked on their behalf to deliver meaningful educational experiences improved their lives and impacted their ability to be successful in their post-secondary life.

Jose revealed that his mother looked upon being granted special education services as a privilege, and she felt that he should take advantage of the opportunity. He personally felt that this special education kept him from being retained for one or more grades while in school. Further, he declared that he knew he was having difficulty with his English language skills and reading. He stated, “It was my English skills, because I really couldn’t really start a conversation without stuttering or read a normal book.....So they literally put me in special education.” He

noted that the pull-out services provided him explicit academic instruction, which helped to remedy his difficulties.

Jose expressed a great amount of gratitude for the intervention and the specialized instruction that mediated his academic problems. Despite his personal trials, he had strong personal resolved to overcome his life challenges. Jose felt that he has been able to thrive in life because of the academic help and personal assistance he received from his teachers and school counselors. Jose shared that he did not tell other students at the time that he was receiving special education services, because he felt his 'normal' peers might react negatively and he wanted to avoid potential mockery. One of his high school girlfriends, however, did have an IEP and he was able to share with her. Thus, when Jose was not going to be made to feel different, he felt safe to disclose his learning challenges and status as a student with an IEP.

Maria expressed genuine appreciation for all assistance that educators provided to her so that she would learn and acquire the skills needed to be successful. She stated, "Honestly, I liked it [special education services] for the fact that the teachers would take the time and they would actually explain stuff. They wouldn't just say, 'Oh, here's the work and just go to the page and just do it.' And, actually, you actually helped me [with] math. I was really good in math, but there was some stuff that I wasn't able to understand and when I got to your math class, I was honest to you and said, 'I don't know fractions.' I'm better now with fractions, because you taught me a way that I was able to understand."

Maria explained that she was grateful for the assistance and was involved in extracurricular activities. She chose to take on student activity/club leadership positions amongst her peers and this vantage point gave her the ability to be influential in the student body. She was able to actively exert self-advocacy throughout her educational experience and stated, "I don't

think anybody that's in special education should feel less than anybody else....Instead of laughing at each other, why not help each other? I mean, there are some students in school that actually laughed at some of the kids. and I would get upset about it. I would let them know they were out of line and then they would feel like they should have never said anything mean.”

Maria's ability to advocate for herself was extended to others who were being disrespected or belittled.

Diverse Experiences in High School

The students who participated in this study had diverse life and academic experiences. Jose had chaos in his personal life had an impact on his path in the academic arena. Jose had difficulty with his direction in life as an adolescent; these difficulties were exacerbated by his family history and his poverty. Family and the influences of familial peers had a significant influence on his behavior throughout his intermediate and early high school years. Specifically, he stated, “I think at the end of the freshman year, I was kind of suicidal, probably because there was so much drama with my parents...my mom and my step-dad were fighting a lot. Then, my step-dad went to jail and my Mom crashing down on me.... it was too much pressure so I started acting out. I began telling people that I wanted to end my life. That's when everyone stepped into help. I finally took refuge and took control of my life. I looked around and I knew that my brothers needed me and that family was more important than just letting it crumble and go all to waste. So, I actually pulled myself together....it seems that there was never a time I could act like a child.”

Throughout her public educational career, Maria had strong active parents who provided a stable home situation, and Maria possessed maturity and insight into herself as she navigated secondary school. Maria shared that she had a wonderful high school experience and loved being

able to learn and to be involved with school activities. She was a student who displayed her leadership skills in class and on campus. Her involvement in the high school's extracurricular activities allowed her to be a leader in school and in the community through numerous service-learning opportunities. She expressed her desire to return to her high school years as they were filled with fond memories and great experiences.

Revelations Found in these Student Voices

Jose and Maria's educational experiences had multiple common attributes, i.e., they each were identified as a student with a mild-moderate learning disability prior to enrollment in high school; they were the oldest child in the household, and they were also English language learners, because the language spoken in their homes was exclusively Spanish. Each student was able to articulate how specific interventions at exact moments in their education benefited them. Both Jose and Maria were able to reflect on their lives and define the advantages they enjoyed in their academic experience because of interventions provided while receiving services through their IEP.

Each of these students had a unique family situation. A single mother whose six children each had a different biological father raised Jose. Jose was keenly aware of being singled out for being different and acted in self-defense because of the negative connotations that being a "special education" student held for him. He was able to reflect upon the situation as he matured during his high school years and embrace the help he was given. In reflection, this young man was aware of the level of chaos in his life; however, he understood that he needed to redirect his behavior. In contrast, the children in Maria's family were all from the union of her mother and father.

Jose was able to express the difficulty he had during his high school years, because he

had to take on the role of the primary male in the household in order to protect his mother and siblings from abusive boyfriends living in the home. Maria, on the other hand, was able to focus on her learning experiences and social endeavors, because she was not in a primary care-taking role in her home. The personalities of these students differed as well. Jose had some difficulty transcending the moods that resulted from puberty and an unstable home life, while Maria, although she experienced some of the growing pains of females in their adolescence, was able to navigate and integrate more readily and more extensively into the social fabric that is intrinsic to the high school experience. Maria had a very positive social and academic high school experience **despite** an underlying issue related to immigration that haunts her today.

Conclusions

Students have valuable knowledge, insights, and feelings to share and we, as educators and adults, have an obligation to listen to what they have to say. As an educator, I am always aware that it is my responsibility to listen to my student's words and also to understand their intent, actions, and behaviors. I teach and help students purposefully through reflection and work consciously to do no harm to the individual that will impede his or her quest to reach personal potential. Being aware of the stigma that often is associated with students who have disabilities and are labeled as such is simply not sufficient intervention. Educators and caring adults, no matter their station, need to be aware that we live in an ableist society. Students, even in a segregated environment, are subject to the overwhelming belief that the dominant culture has a strong preference for ableism. Educators know through research and through intuition that motivation and relationships with students foster positive strides in learning.

I had expected to find that students would have encountered more negative experiences while receiving special education services than they revealed. I was surprised when they recalled

only the very positive nature of their interventions and the helpful and professional school staff that worked on their behalf. The students I interviewed in this pilot study either made direct statements or implied that they understand the challenges in their learning processes. Each of these students understood the characteristics of their disability and had the tendency to embrace the assistance that was provided. Both students also understood that they benefited from the explicit instruction and interventions they were provided since being identified and felt that the help was a direct contributor to their success in earning a high school diploma and in their continued academic pursuits.

Implications

These voices provide proof that students have valuable information to inform educators and that data can shape educational practice. Each participant shared the successes and obstacles in their academic experiences and articulated how their school experience affected their social and family lives. The students were able to express how receiving special education services and the manner in which those services were delivered shaped their academic success. Student insight is constructive in helping educators learn the impact of their instructional techniques.

Being informed about student experience helps teachers to mitigate potential or real harm that could occur when a stigmatizing label is placed on a child even though it is the catalyst that allows federally mandated legislation interventions to be provided. Giving students a forum to join in the educational process is necessary for determining if their needs are being met. Hindsight, from students who has lived with specific experiences, provides clear indications on how services within an ableist culture can benefit a child.

Greater student voice in educational research will provide teachers with evidence to determine how to serve their clientele better. In the findings from the interviews that were

conducted for this study, it is clear that students benefit from specialized instruction prescribed to their specific needs and that instruction is made more effective when the relationship with the teacher is one that is based on genuine interest in many facets of their lives. This finding means that educators need to be constantly sensitive and aware of the holistic nature of their students' experiences. Even in an atmosphere where educators are being cautioned to protect themselves from isolated communication and interactions with their students, it is intuitive to understand that being engaged with students both in and outside of school in appropriate venues will enhance an individual's connection to learning. Students do better in school when they have successes and positive experiences in their lives.

Policy makers should provide funding for programs that allow teachers and students to participate in activities and opportunities that propel them into meaningful learning beyond the school hours and outside the school walls. These connections can allow students to participate in their greater community and to learn how to navigate circumstances that are beyond their usual circumstances. In such a forum, students and educators can learn from one another and adults can be visible, active role models and mentors for their students. More training and inservices for educators need to emphasize the importance of teacher-student relationships and schools need to make available and oversee the community and global opportunities that will propel students to their potential by helping them experience academics through multiple modalities.

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APPENDIX ? : Letter of Informed Consent

Chapman University
College of Educational Studies

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH
Voices of Minority Students Identified in High School as
Being Entitled to Special Education Services

I, Ms. Cheri Whitehead, doctoral student, am asking you to participate in a research study that I will be conducting on the educational experiences of minority youth who have received special education services during high school. You have been selected for this study because you were provided special education services during your public high school years. I will be selecting up to six students to participate in a series of interviews regarding your educational experiences in high school and how you experienced as a student receiving special education services.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to understand the how being labeled as a student requiring an individualized education plan affected your education, self-perception, and post-secondary school life.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

- I will need to meet with you to one or more conversations about your educational experiences. These conversations will be held on a weekly or bi-monthly basis between one and eight times all together from March 2011 through August 2011. Each time we will meet approximately 1-2 hours. These meetings may be at your home, school, or other public place depending on your preference and where we may find some space for confidentiality.
- You will be asked to tell me about your background, educational experiences during high school and other experiences that you believe were important during your high school years. These conversations will explore your memories, beliefs, values, interests, and concerns about your educational experience. I would like to audio record these conversations.
- You have the right to refuse to be audio recorded and your participation in the study will not be affected. If you do not wish to be audio recorded then I will take careful notes during and after our conversations.
- In return for your participation in my research, you may wish to ask me questions regarding careers, schooling, or other educational concerns or seek support with completing college or job applications and the like. I will gladly offer the support I can and do my best to answer your questions.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There is a minimal risk for participants in this study. If you reveal sensitive or potentially damaging information, such as legal status, there is a risk that this information could become known to others. Although I am taking steps to ensure confidentiality (see “confidentiality” section below) there is always a risk that such steps will not suffice. However, I am taking extra precautions to ensure that in the event that confidentiality is broken, information of a very

sensitive nature cannot be accessed. I will do this by using a secret code word to refer to legal status in all written materials and only I will know this code word. If you reveal legal status in any audio recordings, the information will immediately be erased.

PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

You will not receive money for your participation. However, I will provide a meal or snack for us during each meeting.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO YOU AND TO SOCIETY

You may benefit from participating in this research by having someone who available to answer questions or concerns you may have about schooling, education, careers, and/or colleges. This research may also support teachers and educators to better understand the issues that affect minority students who have been identified as qualifying for special education services.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain strictly confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission.

All of the audiotapes and notes collected will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home and only I will have access to it. Pseudonyms will be given for all participants and a separate identifying code-key will be kept in a separate location. When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity.

Because the use of audio recordings may reveal your identity to others even when pseudonyms are used, you will have the right to refuse to be audio taped at any given time.

Audio recordings will be used solely for analysis and outside of the research team only transcribers will have access to them. Upon completion of the transcriptions of the tapes and data analysis, all tapes will be erased. All tapes should be erased by August 2011.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATOR

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me, Cheri Whitehead via my cell phone at (714) 904-8018.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

"I understand that I may refuse to participate in or I may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Also, the investigator may stop the study at any time. I also understand that no information that identifies me, will be released without my separate consent

and that all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent re-obtained. I understand that if I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Chancellor, Chapman University, One University Drive, Orange, CA 92866; Telephone (714) 997-6826. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the Research Participant's Bill of Rights."

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT, PARENT, OR LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Subject

Name of Parent or Legal Representative (if applicable)

Signature of Subject, Parent or Legal Representative

Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

I have explained the research to the subject or his/her legal representative, and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this document and freely consents to participate.

Name of Investigator

Signature of Investigator

Date (must be the same as subject's)

**Appendix A
Consent Agreement**

Consent Agreement for Audio Recording

I have received an adequate description of the purpose and procedures for audio taping sessions during the course of the proposed research study. I give my consent to allow _____ to be audio recorded during participation in this study, and for those records to be reviewed by persons involved in the study, as well as for other professional purposes as described to me. I understand that all information will be kept confidential and will be reported in an anonymous fashion, and that the recordings will be erased after the study has been completed by August 2011. I further understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time without penalty.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Parent / Guardian (if participant is a minor)

Date

Signature of Parent / Guardian (if participant is a minor)

Date