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AUTHOR Barga, Nancy K.
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined factors that have contributed to the educational success of nine college students with learning disabilities and explored how these students manage their disabilities in the educational arena. Data came from student academic records, interviews, and classroom observations over a 6-month period. Factors studied include the impact of labeling, the feeling of stigmatization, denial of access to particular programs of study, positive coping techniques, the role of benefactors, self-improvement techniques, management and study skills, and development of passing techniques to avoid disclosure. The study found that six of the students used passing techniques to avoid disclosure and to make it through school. Implications for administrators are discussed. (Contains approximately 30 references.) (JDD)

Learning Disabled Students in Education: Managing a Disability

Nancy K. Barga
Washington State University

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Abstract

Learning disabled students often face a host of problems that make the school environment difficult for them. Some of these problems include a marked lower self-esteem, social problems with peer relationships, and difficulty in completing school work. As such, learning disabled students have a higher drop-out rate from high school than their non-disabled peers. A review of the literature reveals that the majority of research has focused on problems that lead to school failure for learning disabled students. Hence, there exists a dearth in the literature regarding school success for learning disabled students. Given this absence in the literature, the purpose of this descriptive study was to examine factors that have attributed to learning disabled students' success in schools and to explore how learning disabled students manage their disabilities in the educational arena. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the researcher collected academic records and conducted interviews and classroom observations over a six-month period with nine learning disabled students currently enrolled in a four-year state university. The results of this study has significant implications for school administrators and university educators who provide services for learning disabled students under current federal laws.

Learning Disabled Students in Education: Managing a Disability

Introduction

This qualitative field study focused on how learning disabled student manage their disabilities in education. There were two objectives to this study. The first objective was to describe in a phenomenological sense how students, who were identified as being *learning disabled* at different points in their lives, manage their disabilities in education. The second objective was to examine what factors attribute to learning disabled students' success in school.

For the purposes of this study, learning disabled students were defined as those students identified by an educational institution employing the federal government's description and categorization of learning disabled students. The federal government defines students with specific learning disabilities as:

> . . . those children who have a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved with understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which the disorder may manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. Such disorders include such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Such a term does not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage (Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975).

Students with learning disabilities have average or above average scores on intelligence tests and below average scores on at least one achievement test. Labeling a student *learning disabled* is likely when differences between ability and achievement are

significant on various academic and achievement tests (Semmel, Gottlieb, and Robinson, 1979; Ysseldyke and Algozzine, 1990).

This study examined two groups of successful learning disabled students.[1] The first group, called traditional learning disabled students, consisted of four students who were identified as learning disabled during their formal years of schooling.[2] The second group, called non-traditional learning disabled students, consisted of five students who were identified as being learning disabled at the higher education level. All students were currently enrolled in a four-year state university.

Statement of the Problem

Since the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, schools in the United States have incorporated a multitude of programs to assist disadvantaged students. The Vocational Rehabilitation Act, passed in 1973 by the federal government, emphasizes providing an equal education for handicapped students as the post secondary level (Scott, 1990). In 1975, congress passed Public Law 94:142, which ensures a free and appropriate education for all handicapped children in the United States (Semmel, Gottlieb, & Robinson, 1979). The Vocational Rehabilitation Act and PL 94:142 have direct implications for learning disabled students. Both laws mandate that learning disabled students receive supplemental services in educational settings. Ysseldyke and Algozzine (1990) note that roughly 5% of the school age population is considered learning disabled. Furthermore, the category of learning disabled is the most recent and prevalent exceptional condition in special education today. Since its inclusion, it has grown to the serve the largest group of students receiving special education services. Ysseldyke, et al., (1990) notes that 1.9 million, or 47% of the 4.4 million students who received services under PL 94:142 during the 1986-87 school year were identified as learning disabled. In higher education, the number of students with learning disabilities has

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[1] Successful learning disabled students are defined as those who graduated from high school and are currently completing a college degree.

[2] Formal years of schooling is defined as kindergarten through grade twelve.

increased from .3% in 1983 to 1.2% in 1987 (Higher Education and Adult Training for People with Handicaps- HEATH, 1992). Nationwide, HEATH estimates there are 20,000 learning disabled students enrolled in post-secondary institutions. At the post-secondary level, learning disabled students comprise the largest population of handicapped students receiving services (Jarrow, 1987).

The number of learning disabled students in all educational institutions is increasing. However, in spite of federal-initiated laws to assist learning disabled students, a review of the literature suggests that learning disabled students continue to face multiple problems that make learning in the school environment difficult for them. Learning disabled students may have difficulty in reading, writing, spelling, and with numerical concepts (Student Support Services, 1992). Learning disabled students are often easily distracted, may appear uncoordinated, and may have poor time management skills. Additionally, they may demonstrate difficulty in understanding or following directions and often misinterpret social situations and/or other behaviors. Furthermore, learning disabilities are life-long and chronic (Powell, 1992; Student Advising and Learning Center, 1992). In regards to higher education, the transition form high school to college can be traumatic for even the most competent learning disabled student (Miller, 1988).

Perhaps the most telling statistic is the alarming 40% high school drop-out rate among learning disabled students as reported by Lichtenstein (1992) as opposed to 25% among their non-disabled peers. Studies conducted by Levin, Zigmond, and Birch (1985) estimate the drop-out rate for learning disabled students to be 47%. According to Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Thurlow (1992) students with mild handicaps, such as learning disabled students, drop out of school more frequently that students with other handicaps. Indeed, research by Edgar (1987) and Zetlin & Hosseini (1989) indicates that young adults who are at the greatest risk of experiencing lifelong economic and social difficulties are those who were identified as disabled and who dropped out of high school. In sum, learning disabled students represent a population that is at a high risk for

dropping out of school and experiencing economic and social difficulties as members of society.

A review of the literature relative to learning disabled students' management of their disability in education is noticeably scant (Jones, 1972; Lichtenstein, 1992; Zetlin & Hosseini, 1989) as much of the research in the past has focused on mentally handicapped students. Furthermore, much of the past research surrounding learning disabled students has focused on why learning disabled students fail academically in school settings. Hence, there is a void in the literature surrounding learning disabled students' success in school. The absence of such literature in this area sets up this present study. Given this void, this study explores how learning disabled students successfully manage their disabilities in education.

It must be noted that learning disabilities generate great controversy in the field of education. Coles (1989) states that learning disabilities appear to be more conjecture than fact as there is a lack of scientific and empirical evidence confirming they exist. Scott (1990) adds that problems with classifying learning disabled students include ambiguity in defining learning disabilities, variation in structure and implementation of assessments, and inaccurate decisions made by Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams that contribute to the erroneous labeling of students as learning disabled. Although discrepancies exist in regards to learning disabilities, the focus of this study is to explore students' management of their learning disabilities rather than find support or non-support for their disabilities.

Methodology

The nature of a particular study and the goals being addressed by the researcher determines the type of methodology to be used. This study was designed to investigate how learning disabled students manage their disabilities in education and what factors contribute to their success in school through the use of qualitative research. The literature in this area is extremely underdeveloped and has not been systematically explored through qualitative

research. Qualitative research was selected for the methodology as it is useful to reveal and understand more about a phenomenon in which little is known (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). A qualitative approach enables the researcher to investigate a particular phenomena comparing, contrasting, coding, and classifying the data towards the development of a grounded theory. Yin (1989) confirms that such an approach is appropriate when asking "how" and "why" questions and when the research focuses on contemporary phenomenon in real-life context. Yin adds that direct observation and systematic interviewing aid in the process of collecting data for the research.

Purposeful sampling techniques were employed for the selection process (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). The researcher contacted the director of learning disabled students' program at the selected university and explained the study. With the assistance of the director, traditional and non-traditional learning disabled students were identified. The learning disabled students were contacted first via a letter that was collectively generated by the director and the researcher. Students who responded in a positive manner towards participating in the study were then contacted by the researcher and scheduled for an interview. The interview served as a screening process and allowed the researcher to explain the study, discuss time commitments, explain participants' rights in terms of confidentiality, and answer questions. For practical purposes, four traditional and five non-traditional learning disabled students from each group were selected for the study. Selection was based on verbal response, willingness to participate in the study, and availability in terms of time commitment. Once the students were selected for the study, consent forms were signed. Due to limited resources, the students were selected from a site that was within a reasonable geographic location for the researcher. The students ranged in age from 18 to 45 years of age and varied widely in their range of disabilities. Appendix A provides a profile of each student who participated in the study.

Consistent with qualitative research (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Yin, 1989) data collection consisted of conducting semi-

structured, open-ended taped interviews, participant observation, and document collection over a six-month period with the study's participants.

Data Analysis

The various forms of data were analyzed utilizing a qualitative method of constant comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Lofland and Lofland, 1984). The works of Goffman (1963) and Edgerton (1967) were used to guide the study in examining concepts of how learning disabled students managed their disabilities in education. Utilizing inductive data analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1984; Strauss, 1991; Yin, 1989), units of information in the data were marked as categories and themes began to emerge. The process of unitizing or coding the data involves developing single units of similar information from the raw data. Coding the data lead to the creation of categories of similarly related data. Within the categories, properties emerged and consistent patterns became visible (Strauss, 1991). By analyzing the categories and properties, the researcher inductively formed explanatory relationships regarding "how" and "why" from the data. The results of the study, addressed at the end of the paper, provides implications for administrators.

Results

The following provides a summary of the study's results. It must be pointed out that this study began by examining and exploring two different groups of learning disabled students; traditional and non-traditional. One might suspect that vast differences would have been observed between the two groups. However, the study's results indicate that the students are more alike than they are different. But before these similarities and differences can be discussed, it is helpful to understand what barriers the students faced in the classroom.

Barriers: Labeling, Stigmatization, and Gatekeeping

For the majority of the students in the study, the process of labeling, stigmatization and gatekeeping were inter-related and created barriers for them in education. Each one shall be discussed.

Labeling

Clearly, the students in this study experienced various degrees of labeling[3]. Labeling was cited to be a positive experience for the students because it made sense of their academic struggles and meant getting help. Suzanne and Fay stated they knew they were not "dumb or retarded," but they did not know why they struggled in school as they did. Once identified, Suzanne said "things just fell into place. I knew the results of the tests were true." Labeling was also a positive experience when it led to getting help from the schools. Paul recalls the relief he felt when he was identified as learning disabled. "It was actually more of a relief to get the help I needed. It was a place to start my homework."

Labeling was negative when it carried negative connotations for the students. This happened frequently when students were removed from their regular classroom in a very public manner to receive special education assistance in another room of the building. Often they were chastised by peers and teachers. Lisa believes formal schools stigmatize students by pulling them out of the classroom to attend special classes. Hank was placed in special education programs throughout formal schooling. He perceived these programs as "not a group for smart people. It was for stupid people and the trouble makers." Nick felt "extradited" and removed from his peers when he was placed in special learning programs in school. Nick adds that he believed in his label of "underachiever" for twelve years, and it has been difficult for him to consciously break this thought pattern. Fay notes that her school instilled "dummy groups," where "kids knew who was in each group and they stayed there forever." Furthermore, labeling was negative when the students

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[3] Labeling is defined as anything functioning as means of identification or as a descriptive term; can be formal or informal.

were placed in special education rooms with students of different disabilities. Karen and Jim reported they both were placed in resource rooms with students who had a wide range of severe emotional and behavioral problems, and this made them feel uncomfortable.

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

It is noteworthy to point out that all of the learning disabled students, aside from Suzanne, knew early on that something was different about them in terms of how they performed in school. They sensed something was different about their learning ability *before* they were ever identified as learning disabled. This perception was usually sensed in early grade school. This finding is significant as it implies that students define themselves in terms of "normalcy" at a very young age, based on how they measure up to their peers academically. Apparently school success represents an early benchmark for students in terms of normalcy. It was mentioned that Suzanne never suspected she had a learning disability, although she struggled in school. There are several reasons why this may have occurred. Suzanne attended a small rural school while growing up, and she may have benefitted from a lower teacher to student ratio and thus received more attention in smaller classes. Furthermore, Suzanne admits that she did not challenge herself in school. "Throughout high school, I didn't know I had one (learning disability) 'cause I didn't take classes hard enough to make myself think something was going on."

Stigmatization

Stigmatization[4] took on different forms, depending upon the context. In formal schools, stigmatization was evident via name calling, accusations, and low academic expectations by peers and

[4] Stigmatization is defined as receiving differential treatment based on perceptions by others.

teachers alike. During first and second grade, Lisa classmates would tell her she was stupid. "I hated those two grades!" Paul recalled a time he asked his high school algebra teacher for help. She boomed, "I just explained that on the board!" The teacher continued her tirade by calling him "stupid" several times in front of the class. Jim spoke of a high school teacher telling him to his face that he was "stupid and lazy." After being identified as learning disabled, Karen said her high school math teacher fondly called her "D.D.," short for "Darling Dummy." He would smile at her and say, "Well, at least we know why you are so bad in math!" Fay and Nick expressed that being learning disabled puts a question in the minds of teachers and they are often treated differently. Teachers would ask them, "Did you get that, Nick?" or "Do you understand, Fay?" Fay adds, "Once you tell someone (peer or teacher) that you are learning disabled, they treat you a little differently by how they relate to you." Karen confirms that friends and instructors would talk slower and louder to her, treating her "as if I were deaf!"

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

The most severe form of stigmatization occurred when a professor, chair, or department would attempt to counsel students towards another major or remove the students from their department. Hank was met with resistance by the Engineering Department upon entering the university. With a grade point average below a 3.0, three failed classes in math and chemistry and the fact that it took him four years to complete a two year program at a junior college, he was discouraged by the Chair of the Chemical Engineering Department. The Chair told Hank upfront, "You can't make it here. The students are smart and you could never keep up with them." Hank changed his major to civil engineering, which he

felt was a better fit with his background in construction. The first time Lisa asked a professor in the Engineering Department if she could take an exam with accommodations, he "panicked." It was the first time he became aware of her learning disability. He feared she would misread labels and cause problems for the engineering department. A meeting was held to have her removed from class. Another meeting was held to have her removed from the department. She was labeled a "dangerous engineer" by another professor. He told her, "Why beat your head against the rocks? Do something that is easier." Lisa contends some engineering professors are still trying to remove her from their department.

Dan and Paul expressed they did not feel stigmatized at the college level. This appears to be related to the degree by which their disability impacts their intended college major. At this point, Dan has been labeled as bright by his professors and Paul has yet to take a class that challenges nis disability in math. In short, those students whose learning disability hinders their intended major experience stigmatization. Those students whose learning disability does not impact their intended major have not experienced stigmatization.

Gatekeeping

The process of "gatekeeping" emerged as a concept from this study. Gatekeeping is a barrier process that serves to maintain the status quo. Gatekeepers can be individuals or institutions which act on behalf of preserving or maintaining quality control of a program/department. This is done by either denying learning disabled students access to a particular college goal or by permitting access but on conditional terms. Gatekeeping and stigmatization were related to each other. If a student was stigmatized, the student was more likely to experience gatekeepers. For example, students whose learning disabilities were most prominent, such as Hank, Lisa, and Fay, had experienced difficulty with professors and/or departments within their intended major. Powerful gatekeepers attempted to discourage particular learning disabled students from entering a program of study. Students whose

disability was less visible, or did not impact their major or who could manage their disability by themselves, such as Dan, Nick, and Paul, did not have gatekeepers.

Coping and Passing

The processes of labeling, stigmatization and gatekeeping have other implications for the students in terms of how they coped with their learning disabilities. These three processes individually and collectively created expectations and barriers for the students. To be successful in school, the students had to respond to these processes. To answer the question of how learning disabled students successfully manage their disabilities in school, two key techniques, *coping* and *passing* emerged from the data. Coping techniques are described as behaviors or initiatives taken by the student to assist in *managing* his/her disability. Passing techniques are described as particular behaviors a student engages in so as to *hide* or pass off the disability from others. Passing occurred in academic and/or social contexts.

Coping

All nine of the students in the study employed coping techniques in order to manage their disability in an educational setting. While coping techniques were varied and numerous, two main types of coping techniques emerged from the data: *Positive coping techniques* and *negative coping techniques*.

Positive coping techniques are employed techniques that proved to be of a benefit for the student. Positive coping techniques assisted the student in managing his/her disability in a positive manner. Positive techniques can be divided into three subcategories. They include Benefactors, Self-Improvement Techniques, and Strategies of Management and Study Skills. Each technique will be discussed.

Benefactors

Without exception, all students in the study identified and relied upon *benefactors*. Benefactors were individuals who could be

relied upon to assist the learning disabled student through academic and personal problems. Benefactors can be viewed as positive forces in the students' lives. Functions of benefactors included providing emotional support and understanding, acting as a sounding board for personal problems, assisting the learning disabled students with homework, acting as an advocate on behalf of the student, or driving students to appointments. The most frequently cited benefactor by five of the nine students was one's own biological mother. Paul described his mother as a fierce advocate for him during high school. She was instrumental in getting him transferred into a different math class after the teacher humiliated Paul by calling him "stupid" several times, and she was instrumental in securing a tutor so Paul would not fall behind academically. In Paul's own words, "She's very protective of me." Lisa's and Jim's mothers helped both of them through formal schooling in several ways. Lisa was removed from a second grade classroom and transferred to another district at her mother's insistence when the teacher expressed that she believed Lisa was retarded and that the parents should not expect much from her academically. Throughout junior high and high school, Lisa's mom would faithfully check her papers for mis-spelled words and took turns with Lisa in reading her text books. She also actively sought help for Lisa's disabilities at the high school level, although her pleas were ignored by school administrators. Jim's mother would write his papers while he dictated his thoughts and words to her. Since his handwriting left much to be desired, Jim's mother would also write his papers for him in her own handwriting. One teacher in high school accepted all of his work handwritten by his own mother. Other benefactors included friends, teachers, and college personnel who worked with the learning disabled students at the Student Learning Center.

Self-Improvement Techniques

Students also employed self-improvement techniques. Self-improvement techniques can be described as techniques or actions the students took upon themselves in order to capitalize on improving their academic success with their disability. Self-

improvement techniques included taking year-long breaks away from the demands of the college system, seeking and initiating help at the university level when needed, motivating one's self through positive affirmations, deliberately placing one's self in situations that would be growth producing, and establishing advantageous seating the classroom.

Dan employed the most self-improvement techniques. Foremost, he recognizes his struggle with communication and socializing. Thus, Dan spends time in bars to learn how to communicate more like the "common folk." Dan also purposely places himself in social situations where he has to explain himself to others and use their terminology. Additionally, Dan plans to enroll in Drawing and Dance classes that he hopes will enhance his academic and social abilities. Dan also forces himself to do tasks with his left hand, which he believes will help him to utilize both sides of his brain more effectively. Last, Dan has an established pattern whereby he takes "breaks" from the demands of schools and the "educational system" in which he doesn't fit. For example, after graduating from high school, Dan managed an ice cream store and worked for a pizza delivery in his home town. After attending two years at a state college, Dan traveled to Texas with a friend and spent a year in Houston doing odd jobs and earning a massage therapist license. Dan claims he needs these breaks because the traditional system of education drives him "crazy."

Fay and Nick also employ self-improvement techniques. Fay, who typically prefers to remain on the outside of groups, occasionally places herself in situations where she must perform. Such situations include reading outloud or speaking in front of groups. After graduating from high school, Nick elected to attend a private institution for two years that is specifically designed to help learning disabled students transition from high school into college. Nick credits this school for making "an absolute difference" for him academically.

Strategies of Management and Study Skills

By far, most of the coping techniques employed by the learning disabled students fell under the present category. Strategies of management include using technology such as computers, utilizing time management skills, doing relaxation techniques before tests, taping classes and maintaining a day-runner or personal calendar. Study skills involve utilizing tutorial assistance, test readers, reading specialists, and setting aside time each night to study.

The amount of time the learning disabled students devoted to their studies was overwhelming. In addition to their class load, they often spent time with reading or writing specialists or receiving tutorial assistance at the Student Learning Center. Such services were demanding upon the students as they represented appointments that had to be arranged into an already compact schedule. Fay, Hank, Lisa and Suzanne received the most services from specialists and tutors. Interestingly enough, they also experienced the most difficulty with gatekeepers.

Negative Coping Techniques

Unlike positive coping techniques, negative coping techniques carried with them consequences and results that did not benefit or assist the learning disabled student. Negative coping techniques fell under the category of *passing*. Students passed for two reasons. They passed to avoid disclosure of their disability and they passed to successfully make it through school. Six of the nine students employed passing techniques of one aspect or another. Passing served the main function of enabling the students overcome academic and social barriers and fit in with the mainstream.

Passing to Avoid Disclosure

All of the students in the study selectively disclosed information about their disability to others. However, six deliberately employed passing techniques in which they attempted to hide their learning disabilities from others. They passed to avoid disclosure which stemmed from a fear of rejection and stigmatization. Passing occurred in formal schools, at the college

level and in social contexts. In formal schools, Karen intentionally waited for hallways to clear before changing to her next class so peers would not see her leaving the special education room. She would go to great lengths to hide her elementary primer books she carried around with her in high school. Fay would purposely miss the first word of a Spelling Bee, even if she knew how to spell it. "It was always best to miss the first word . . . and get out of it right away. Some place along the line I knew I wasn't going to get it." At the college level, Nick and Suzanne would elect not to utilize accommodation services for some classes since this would stigmatize them. The students also would avoid situations whereby one's disability might be more pronounced and easily noticed. Fay purposely remains on the outside of groups where it is "less threatening" and where she does not have to be accountable for responses:

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

For those students who have reading deficits, reading in front of others often presented problems. For example, at a restaurant, Lisa and Karen would covertly avoid reading from the menus. They would resolve their inability to read menu in one of two ways. They would either order a popular dish typically carried by restaurants or solicit an opinion from someone else in the party and then choose an item the person named.

Some learning disabled students avoid telling others about their disability. They lie to others to avoid disclosure. Nick stated it best when he said, "The real challenge is, okay, how much do I care if people think I'm stupid?" Fay, while working at a learning disabilities information booth at a conference, refused to identify herself as learning disabled. Suzanne, who relies on friends help her

with some of her studies, avoids telling others about her test arrangements and her learning problems.

Passing to Make It Through School

Students also passed in effort to make it through a most difficult environment- school. If they were not able to successfully complete their school work in a similar fashion like the other students in the class, they sought ways to make ends meet.

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

Lisa would start researching a report by visiting the children's' section of the local library. She would peruse materials and check out items that would help her form a foundation of beginning to understand the topic. She rented and watched public broadcast system's (PBS) video tapes in efforts to gain more information since reading was so difficult for her. She also had her mom read her books to her throughout junior high and high school. This was less time consuming than for Lisa to attempt to read her books herself.

Jim confessed that he is a "con-artist" and bluffed his way through school. He would read the front and back covers of books and write a book report from that information. He would use his poor handwriting to his advantage when working with a teacher. If the

teacher questioned the spelling of a particular word in Jim's paper, he would read the sentence and stop at the unknown word and wait. The teacher would invariably spell the word for Jim, and he would then "have it." Jim also relied on his mom to help him through school. Teachers would accept papers from Jim that were handwritten by his mother since his handwriting was so poor.

Nick states he relies on his personality to assist him through school. He purposely sits in the front row to be noticed by instructors. Front rows help Nick take advantage of what he terms his "non-academic skills" and "getting in good" with the teacher in order to get higher grades. In addition to "shining up" to teachers, Nick admits he lowers others' expectations of him. "Setting expectations has a lot to do with a lot of learning disabled people I know. If people set their expectations lower, we can get by better. It's unfortunate, but it gets you by." Nick said teachers lowered their expectations of him through formal school by requiring shorter assignments for him and expecting less of him academically.

Those Who Don't Pass

Three of the nine students did not employ passing techniques. Dan and Paul did not pass for very similar reasons. Hank, on the other hand, did not pass because his disabilities are so severe that he could probably not successfully pass.

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

Paul's learning disability presents problems for him only in math. So far in college, he has not had to take a math course. But Paul knows that when the time comes for math, he will rely on the university's Student Learning Center to assist him. He also recognizes that if he goes into business for himself, he will hire someone to do the math-related work for him. Additionally, Paul

notes that many people have trouble with math. While he does not go out of his way to disclose his disability, he is not afraid to tell people he has a lot of problems with math because "a lot of people have problems with math." Paul's disability does not impact him socially.

In spite of having some of the most severe disabilities among the learning disabled students in this study, Hank does not pass. Hank does not pass because his disabilities are so severe that he cannot pass effectively. Hank is socially isolated by his disabilities and given this, he is a loner and has no one to "pass off to." Hank either isolates himself from others, or else he is forced to disclose his learning disabilities to others for academic survival. Once his disabilities become apparent to his peers, he is excluded by them. He states, "It's pretty hard to pretend that you can't read when studying with other people." Hank stressed the importance of having to study in groups in Engineering or "you can't survive . . . these people have to be my best friends." Hank must rely on them for assistance and he is upfront about his learning disability since he cannot hide it in the academic realm.

Summary

Labeling and stigmatization were common experiences in formal schools and college among the learning disabled students in this study. Gatekeeping emerged as a process towards those students at the college level whose learning disabilities hindered their academic pursuit of their intended major.

Labeling, stigmatization, and gatekeeping lead the students to believe and feel that they did not "fit in" academically with their peers. As a result, the students in this study employed multiple coping techniques in an effort to successfully manage their disabilities in school. Coping techniques could be viewed as being either positive or negative, depending upon the outcome it provided for the student. Positive coping techniques consisted of benefactors, implementing self-improvement techniques, and utilizing strategies and other management skills to assist with academics.

Negative coping techniques were described as passing. Students passed to avoid disclosure of their disability and to make it through school. Passing was deemed negative for two reasons. First, passing was not seen to be in the best interest of the student academically. Second, passing lead to the students to avoid disclosure of their disability, mostly out of fear of stigmatization. Students employed passing techniques in formal schools and at the college level. Passing techniques were used by six of the students to hide their disability from others. Three students did not employ passing techniques based on various aspects related to the intensity of their disability.

Implications for Administrators

Ultimately, this study raises the question: Are schools effectively educating all students? The learning disabled students in this study developed a variety of coping techniques in efforts to be successful in the academic arena. The fact that the students develop their own coping techniques suggests that schools are not meeting their academic needs in spite of federal laws. Certainly more research is needed to further explore this area.

The results of this study also poses several implications for administrators both in formal schools and at the college level. Each one shall be briefly discussed.

Foremost, training is needed for teachers, professors, and school personnel in efforts to increase their awareness of learning disabilities. Through training and awareness, educators can become more sensitive to the needs of learning disabled students and better be able to serve them without stigmatizing and alienating them. Case (1992) confirms that research has lead to better instruction since PL 94:142, but few schools have trained their staffs in dealing with issues surrounding disabled students.

More emphasis on research to clearly define learning disabilities and better methods of identifying learning disabled students are needed. Eight of the nine students indicated they knew something was different about their learning in early grade school. Many of these students went without valuable assistance for years.

By establishing a clearer framework of what learning disabilities are and their causes, educators will be in a better position to provide early identification and assistance for such students.

Schools must be encouraged to incorporate inclusion models of special education as described by Case (1992), Graden (1992) and Wheelock (1992). The goal of inclusion models is to increase the capacity of the school and classroom teachers to accommodate a wider range of skills by merging and blending students in the classroom when appropriate. Tracking of students becomes passe. Inclusion models would help to eliminate the stigmatizing process of pulling students out of class to attend special education services in another room.

Last, educators must recognize that students bring different learning styles and strengths to the classroom. Furthermore, not every student learns in the same manner (Grinder, 1989). Educators must become more accepting towards learning differences and student accommodations, and be able to teach to a a wider range of students (Lieberman, 1992).

In conclusion, the small sample of learning disabled students in this study experienced stigmatizing processes throughout formal school and college that created barriers for them. Learning disabled students represent a population of rich resources. When schools treat learning disabled students differently, they become negligent for not holistically tapping into the full potential that can be offered by such individuals. Certainly, school personnel must wrestle to find a balance between accommodating learning disabled students and realistically assisting them in pursuing career and life goals whereby they can be contributing members of society. This dilemma indicates a need for further research as well.

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APPENDIX A

TRADITIONAL LD STUDENTS	COLLEGE MAJOR	TYPE OF DISABILITY
Jim	Crop Science	language and writing deficits
Karen	Special Education	auditory processing deficits
		visual discrimination problems
		reversals, transpositions
		directionality difficulties
		short term memory deficit
Paul	Visual Communications	math deficits
Nick	Chemical Engineering	dyslexia
		poor organizational skills
		concentration deficits
		writing deficits
NON-TRADITIONAL LD STUDENTS	COLLEGE MAJOR	TYPE OF DISABILITY
Lisa	Mechanical Engineering	dyslexia
		reading and spelling deficits
Fay	Special Education	math and reading deficits
		short term memory deficits
		poor spelling skills
Suzanne	Animal Science	reading comprehension
		poor recall
Dan	Zoology	verbal and written
		communication deficits
Hank	Civil Engineering	poor reading comprehension
		slow reading rate
		poor memory and concentration
		poor spelling skills