

No Teacher Left Behind:

The Influence of Teachers with Disabilities in K-8 Classrooms

A Meta-Synthesis

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Abstract

This meta-synthesis of the literature on K-8 teachers with disabilities examines the profound influence that teachers with disabilities can have in our classrooms. Teachers with disabilities act as valuable and realistic role models for all students and bring unique qualities to the classroom, including a passion for inclusive education and creative methods of instruction. However, prejudicial barriers to success often restrict these exceptional teachers from access to our classrooms, undermining the inclusion movement present in most special education programs and schools today. When these teachers are denied employment, students with disabilities suffer in and out of the classroom from a lack of identity construction, reduced self-esteem, and nonexistent advocacy skills.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Stuttering is a communication disorder characterized by disruptions in the production of speech sounds (Polloway, Miller, & Smith, 2004). While specific disabilities are not included in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), certain disabilities are excluded, and stuttering is not excluded. Therefore, stuttering meets the guidelines defined by the ADA, and is considered a disability. *Identity construction* is the process by which we construct a sense of who we are; identity construction occurs as a dynamic process as a child develops; this process is shaped by parents, society, gender, culture, and other factors, including disability (Dole, 2001).

While many children were removed from the general classroom for special education services in the past, many children with disabilities are included in mainstream classrooms today. Their augmented curriculum is delivered to them in the context of the general education classroom. This move toward inclusion sends a message to children with disabilities, and the message is clear: yes, children with disabilities can succeed in mainstream society (e.g., the classroom). They may need modifications, they may require adaptations, but the majority of educators and educational theorists have come to the consensus that children with disabilities need this message of acceptance and integration.

This being said, the bus stops there; the message of hope ends; some children are left behind.

To explain that statement, let's go back to that inclusive classroom I just described: within that classroom, there are many role models for children without disabilities. These students may look to most teachers and school staff and see examples of people like them succeeding in everyday life. However, the child with a disability, while now included in the mainstream

classroom, sees no one like him or herself. In fact, he or she has to look very hard to find anyone with a disability.

The ADA has affected positive change for people with disabilities. In fact, many people without disabilities now perceive a level playing field when it comes to the hiring process. However, people with disabilities know that simply is not true, a fact I will discuss in greater depth in this review of the literature. Whether the injustice is overt or covert, whether it occurs early in the interview process or is embedded at a later time, or whether it happens once the teacher is in the classroom, nonetheless discrimination and intolerance are often present (Griffith & Cooper, 2002).

Due to this prejudice and inequality, many times if a child does see a teacher with a disability, that teacher may have to work very hard to hide, or pass, as a non-disabled person most of the time. The teacher may also have to present his or her disability as something they have worked very hard to overcome, implying that now that they are “back to normal” they are a success. Yet this behavior does not cultivate disability pride, but increases disability shame, and perpetuates the myth that one can only feel successful when one’s disability is fully eradicated or overcome (Brown, 2003).

Stuttering, a specific language disorder is often one of those disabilities that people try to hide. Teachers who stutter – as well as teachers with other disabilities – often have two choices during the hiring process: they can try to mask their disorder, or present their disability as a past issue that has been resolved because they “overcame” it and are now successful (i.e., normalized).

Thinking back to that inclusive classroom, it is commonly believed that role models are essential for strong and positive identity construction. Toward this end, children with disabilities

deserve to see successful teachers with disabilities in classrooms and schools. Instead, we often present “super-crip” images of people with disabilities succeeding in heroic feats. This leaves children with disabilities wondering where they fit in a world made only for the perfectly normal. Feelings of fear, grief, worry, anxiety, hopelessness, a loss of place, and a fractured sense of self often result (Storey, 2007). Many times a child’s full potential will be left untapped because they have no authentic purpose for achieving; what could their future possibly look like?

Now, for a final time, we’ll look at that classroom where children with disabilities are integrated into the daily classroom. Imagine a teacher with a disability in that classroom, a teacher just like some of the students he or she teaches. Imagine the positive messages the child with a disability receives as the teacher instructs, leads, and guides students with pride for him or herself. No longer would the message be: “Get normal, then we’ll talk true integration into mainstream society.” Rather, the daily message would profess that there are many types of normal and many ways to fit into society, to find one’s niche. A culture of disability pride could be fostered in this classroom, preparing not only those students with disabilities but also the non-disabled students for life outside of the classroom (Storey, 2007).

1.2. Author’s beliefs and experiences

Merriam (1998) recommended that researchers clarify their biases by describing personal experiences and beliefs that may be used as a lens from which to view, filter, and analyze their research topics. The author of this study agrees with Merriam and wishes to provide the reader with some information regarding my experience as a teacher with a disability.

Like many other educators who have navigated the waters of classroom life, I have been on a voyage of self-discovery and professional development. My own rewarding journey as an educator has taken place in a very unique setting – the Yup’ik Eskimo village of Goodnews Bay,

Alaska, nestled beneath the Akluhn Mountain range. In this valley dotted with rustic houses, by a river teeming with silver salmon and rainbow trout, I live, learn, and teach at Rocky Mountain School. Heart-warming, challenging, unique, sacred; my five years in the Alaska bush have shaped the teacher that I am today.

For the past six years I have had the privilege of teaching many special needs students. Their needs have ranged from vision related issues, to learning disabilities in reading and writing, to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). A large percentage of my classes have had exceptional students with diverse needs requiring daily adaptations, and I have come to know and understand children with many types of disabilities. More challenges bring more opportunities; everyday I relish the chance to use teachable moments as a platform to celebrate diversity and honor differences.

Many people would agree that the exceptional needs of these children require an exceptional teacher. In a peculiar way, I fit this profile: I am a teacher who stutters. As a person with a speech impairment, I have always felt different. At a young age I recall the increasing isolation and hopelessness that settled over me as I realized I was not like other children. I did not hear any adults who spoke like me, and daily I went to speech therapy classes to try and mold my speech into something normal.

As a person who has stuttered all my life, I have always felt unique, different, and at times separate. I speak in an uncommon way; it takes me longer to get words out. I can't consistently predict how I will be received; listeners don't always know how to respond to me. Some people may look away, unsure of how to react. Others may cut me off and begin speaking themselves, and others may begin to speak for me, guessing which word I might say next. These challenges

have allowed me to understand the difficulties exceptional children with special needs have living in a world that promotes uniformity, especially in social settings and peer interactions.

Role models, critical for all children, are often denied to children with disabilities. And yet how can these children envision their future if they never see or hear someone who resembles themselves?

My personal journey from disability shame to disability pride has infused within me a passion for teaching students with disabilities. When my special needs students confide in me – when they share their challenges and triumphs, and their fears and dreams – I speak to them with an authentic and empathetic voice. I hope that my students will not face the same experiences of discrimination; however, I am also realistic. While there have been many advances in equality, there is still much progress to be made. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has affected positive change, yet many job opportunities and advancements are still denied to people with disabilities due to covert discrimination. In the past I have experienced this intolerance firsthand.

In this way, not only am I my students' teacher, but I am also their advocate, preparing them to face the non-disabled world with pride, integrity, and determination. These students offer many gifts to their classrooms and societies. Many times these attributes are underappreciated, and these children remain marginalized. A teacher who helps them realize these gifts is imperative to their personal and academic growth.

The experience of disability offers a distinct perspective on life, one that can be appreciated by the non-disabled world if they listen closely. In my own life I attribute my sense of empathy and my listening skills to my experience with a speech impediment. One of my students with a reading and writing disability is a gifted storyteller; he excels in keeping the Yup'ik oral tradition alive. My student with a visual impairment uses his sense of touch in

remarkably acute ways, navigating a shape-shifting classroom with confidence and ease. My student with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) sends an unmistakable charge of energy into his math group, quickly computing facts and figures while contributing to the collaborative project.

In my work as a rural Alaskan educator, I have found an inner conflict that manifests itself daily in my classroom: I can be myself – a person who stutters – with my students and see the happiness in their eyes when they identify with my experience. We can openly discuss our struggles and share a sense of humor unique to those experiencing disability. However, outside of the classroom, teachers with disabilities – like me – face daily battles which succeed in keeping them out of the classroom. As a teacher with a disability, many times it is necessary to “pass” as a non-disabled person (or at least as someone who has overcome their disability) to be able to secure a teaching position. For my current position, I “passed” as a fluent person – and then let my principal discover that I stutter only *after* he offered me the teaching position (Hauk, 2010). Still, even though I have experienced success *as society would define it*, I continue to believe *all* people should be accepted for who they really are. I have developed the ability to “pass” myself off as a “normal” person (and by “normal,” I mean a person *without* disabilities), but I should not have to pretend to be a person *without* disabilities in order to obtain employment as a teacher. Like the self-described “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, [and] poet” Audre Lorde (1984), I believe that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (pp. 110-113). In other words, hiding my disability from principals, parents, and students does nothing to dispel people’s prejudices about individuals with disabilities.

My experiences as a person – and teacher – who stutters have led me to formulate the following research questions:

1. Why do we push to mainstream children with disabilities – as opposed to pulling them out for isolated instruction – and tell them they can integrate with society, only to deny teachers with disabilities job positions?

2. Why do we set forth examples of the super-disabled, such as Erik Weihenmeyer, the blind man who climbed Mt. Everest, or the para-Olympic champion (we've all seen the posters in school hallways and gyms), while denying children with disabilities everyday examples of people who are different, yet work and succeed in normal careers?

3. Who defines normal? Why can't infinite versions of "normal" coexist?

Identity construction is an important aspect of a child's development, and is contingent upon positive role models. However, my personal belief is that, ultimately, identity is not defined by one's gender, disability status, personality, or any other identifying characteristic. In the continuum of self-discovery, these things do not speak to the true soul of a person. Yet children must start with these concrete, tangible characteristics and build a sense of themselves. Toward this end, we need to provide students with disabilities positive role models who will aid in this preliminary identity construction. Hopefully, later in life, children will evolve to see that disabled or non-disabled status does not alter the essence of who a person *really* is – an essence (or identity) which always remains untouched and eschews labels of any kind. For this transformation to occur, teachers with disabilities must have access to positions in our schools.

1.3. Purpose of this meta-synthesis

This meta-synthesis – which focused on teachers with disabilities, students with disabilities, student identity formation, and disability pride as it relates to disability culture – had multiple purposes. One purpose was to locate and identify journal articles that detailed the lives and careers of teachers with disabilities; I was especially interested in locating articles that

described the career-related experiences, reflections, struggles, and triumphs of these educators. A second purpose was to locate journal articles relating to students with disabilities and their experience with identity formation as seen through the lens of disability. A third purpose was to locate articles explaining the formation of identity in children and adolescents and the central purpose of role models within this process. The fourth purpose was to locate articles defining disability pride and disability culture. The fifth purpose was to classify each article by publication type, to identify the research design, participants, and data sources of each study, and to summarize the findings of each study. My final purpose in conducting this metasynthesis was to identify significant themes that emerged from these articles, and to connect these themes to my own experience as an elementary educator with a disability who teaches children with and without disabilities in an inclusive classroom setting in rural Alaska.

2. Methods

2.1. Selection criteria

The 38 journal articles included in this meta-synthesis met the following selection criteria:

1. The articles explored issues related to teachers with disabilities.
2. The articles explored issues related to identity construction and people with disabilities.
3. The articles explored issues related to disability culture and disability pride.
4. The articles were published in peer-reviewed journals.
5. The articles were published between 1985 and 2007.

2.2. Search procedures

In autumn of 2008, I conducted systematic searches of five databases that index articles related to the disciplines of teacher education, special education, and disability studies. These

five databases included: (a) Education Resources Information Center (ERIC, Ebscohost); (b) PsycINFO (Ebscohost); (c) Professional Development Collection (Ebscohost); (d) Education Journals (ProQuest); and (e) Education Abstracts (OCLC FirstSearch). I used the following search term combinations to conduct Boolean searches of each database:

1. (“teachers with disabilities”).
2. (“students with disabilities”) AND (“identity formation” OR “self concept”).
3. ("self concept" OR "identity formation" OR "self perception" OR "self awareness" OR "self understanding") AND ("disability discrimination" OR "disabled (attitudes toward)" OR "disabilities") AND ("school" OR "education") AND ("advocacy").
4. (“students with disabilities” OR “special needs students”) AND (“role model” OR “advocate” OR “advocacy” OR “ableism”).
5. (“disabled student”) AND (“self image” OR “identity”).
6. (“attitudes toward the handicapped” OR “students with disabilities”) AND (“teacher” OR “teacher education”).

The various database searches yielded a total of 38 articles that met my selection criteria (Bowman & Barr, 2001; Carrington & Brownlee, 2001; Cook, 2001; Dole, 2001; Durlak, Rose, & Bursuck, 1994; Enright & Others, 1996; Ferri, Keefe, & Gregg, 2001; Fusfeld, 1997; Griffith & Cooper, 2002; Hitchings, Luzzo, Retish, Horvath, & Ristow, 1998; Holmberg, 2001; Jones, 2006; Kennedy, 2000; Kling, 2000; Knight, & Wadsworth, 1996; Lewis, Corn, Erin, & Holbrook, 2003; Lovitt, Plavins, & Cushing, 1999; Marlatt, 2002; Mossman, 2002; Mullen, 2001; Papalia-Berardi, Hughes, & Papalia, 2002; Renick & Harter, 1989; Roberson & Serwatka, 2000; Sands & Doll, 1996; Smith, 1989; Smith, 2000; Solis, 2006; Storey, 2007; Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, & Eddy, 2005; Thompson & Dickey, 1994; Tomlan, 1985; Wehmeyer, Palmer,

Soukup, Garner, & Lawrence, 2007; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997; Whitney-Thomas & Moloney, 2001; Wigle & DeMoulin, 1999; Yellin, Yellin, & Claypool, 2003; Zhang, Singleton, Williams-Diehm, & Childes, 2006).

2.3. Coding procedures

I developed a coding form to categorize the information presented in each of the 38 articles. This coding form was based on: (a) publication type; (b) research design; (c) participants; (d) data sources; and (e) findings of the studies.

2.3.1. Publication type

I evaluated and classified each article according to publication type (e.g., research study, descriptive article, guide, opinion piece/position paper, annotated bibliography, review of the literature). *Research studies* employ systematic methods to gather and/or analyze quantitative and/or qualitative data. *Descriptive articles* describe experiences and phenomena but do not employ systematic methods to gather and analyze data. *Guides* recommend specific strategies and/or explain how practitioners might implement particular programs, policies, or curricula. *Opinion pieces/position papers* explain an author's opinion about a particular issue; these articles may support or advocate for particular educational objectives, political views, policy positions, or philosophical ideas. *Annotated bibliographies* include a list of articles on a given topic with a brief summary of each piece of work. *Reviews of the literature* summarize and synthesize the essential themes of previously published works on a particular topic (Table 1).

2.3.2. Research design

I classified each empirical study by research design (i.e., quantitative research, qualitative research, mixed methods research). *Quantitative* researchers collect and analyze numerical data. *Qualitative* researchers use language (as opposed to numbers) to describe experiences and

phenomena, and to tell people's stories. *Mixed methods* research combines quantitative (i.e., numerical) and qualitative (i.e., non-numerical) research methods within a single study (Table 2).

2.3.4. *Participants, data sources, and findings*

I identified the participants in each of the studies (e.g., K-12 students with disabilities, university students with disabilities, teachers with disabilities). I also identified the data sources that were analyzed for each study (e.g., interviews, observations, focus groups, surveys, standardized tests). Finally, I summarized the findings of each study (Table 2).

2.4. *Data analysis*

I used a modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method previously employed by Duke and Ward (2009) to analyze the 38 articles included in this meta-synthesis. I first identified significant statements within each article. For the purpose of this meta-synthesis, I defined significant statements as statements that addressed issues related to: (a) qualities and characteristics of teachers with disabilities; (b) qualities and characteristics of teachers without disabilities; (c) qualities and characteristics of students with disabilities; (d) special education classrooms and inclusive classrooms; (e) the construction of identity and the development of self in students with disabilities; (f) prejudicial barriers to success; (g) the cultivation of disability culture; (h) suggestions for teachers with disabilities; and (i) suggestions for teachers without disabilities. I then developed a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping (verbatim) significant statements with (paraphrased) formulated meanings. These (paraphrased) formulated meanings represented my interpretation of each significant statement. Finally, I grouped the formulated meanings from all 38 articles into theme clusters (or emergent themes). These emergent themes represented the essence (or content) of the entire body of literature (Table 3).

3. Results

3.1. Publication type

I located 38 articles that met my selection criteria. The publication type of each article is identified in Table 1. Fifteen of the 38 articles (39.5%) included in this meta-synthesis were research studies (Carrington & Brownlee, 2001; Dole, 2001; Ferri et al., 2001; Fusfeld, 1997; Hitchings et al., 1998; Lewis et al., 2003; Marlatt, 2002; Mullen, 2001; Renick & Harter, 1989; Roberson & Serwatka, 2000; Thompson & Dickey, 1994; Wehmeyer et al., 2007; Whitney-Thomas & Moloney, 2001; Wigle & DeMoulin, 1999; Yellin et al., 2003). Ten of the articles (26.3%) were guides (Cook, 2001; Durlak et al., 1994; Enright & Others, 1996; Jones, 2006; Kling, 2000; Knight, & Wadsworth, 1996; Lovitt et al., 1999; Test et al., 2005; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997; Zhang et al., 2006). Seven articles (18.4%) were opinion pieces/position papers (Bowman & Barr, 2001; Mossman, 2002; Papalia-Berardi et al., 2002; Sands & Doll, 1996; Solis, 2006; Storey, 2007; Tomlan, 1985). Six of the articles (15.8%) were descriptive articles (Griffith & Cooper, 2002; Holmberg, 2001; Kennedy, 2000; Smith, 1989; Smith, 2000; Wehmeyer et al., 2000).

Table 1

Author(s) & Year of Publication	Publication Type
Bowman & Barr, 2001	Opinion Piece/Position Paper
Carrington & Brownlee, 2001	Study
Cook, 2001	Guide
Dole, 2001	Study
Durlak, Rose, & Bursuck, 1994	Guide
Enright & Others, 1996	Guide
Ferri, Keefe, & Gregg, 2001	Study
Fusfeld, 1997	Study
Griffith & Cooper, 2002	Descriptive Article
Hitchings, Luzzo, Retish, Horvath, & Ristow, 1998	Study
Holmberg, 2001	Descriptive Article
Jones, 2006	Guide
Kennedy, 2000	Descriptive Article
Kling, 2000	Guide
Knight, & Wadsworth, 1996	Guide
Lewis, Corn, Erin, & Holbrook, 2003	Study
Lovitt, Plavins, & Cushing, 1999	Guide
Marlatt, 2002	Study
Mossman, 2002	Opinion Piece/Position Paper
Mullen, 2001	Study
Papalia-Berardi, Hughes, & Papalia, 2002	Opinion Piece/Position Paper
Renick & Harter, 1989	Study

Roberson & Serwatka, 2000	Study
Sands & Doll, 1996	Opinion Piece/Position Paper
Smith, 1989	Descriptive Article
Smith, 2000	Descriptive Article
Solis, 2006	Opinion Piece/Position Paper
Storey, 2007	Opinion Piece/Position Paper
Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, & Eddy, 2005	Guide
Thompson & Dickey, 1994	Study
Tomlan, 1985	Opinion Piece/Position Paper
Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997	Guide
Wehmeyer, Agran, Hughes, 2000	Descriptive Article
Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, Garner, & Lawrence, 2007	Study
Whitney-Thomas & Moloney, 2001	Study
Wigle & DeMoulin, 1999	Study
Yellin, Yellin, & Claypool, 2003	Study
Zhang, Singleton, Williams-Diehm, Childes, 2006	Guide

3.2. Research design, participants, data sources, and findings of the studies

As previously noted, I located 15 research studies that met my selection criteria (Carrington & Brownlee, 2001; Dole, 2001; Ferri et al., 2001; Fusfeld, 1997; Hitchings et al., 1998; Lewis et al., 2003; Marlatt, 2002; Mullen, 2001; Renick & Harter, 1989; Roberson & Serwatka, 2000; Thompson & Dickey, 1994; Wehmeyer et al., 2007; Whitney-Thomas & Moloney, 2001; Wigle & DeMoulin, 1999; Yellin et al., 2003). The research design, participants, data sources, and findings of each of these studies are identified in Table 2.

Table 2

Author	Research Design	Participants	Data Sources	Findings
Carrington & Brownlee, 2001	Qualitative	10 final-year education program students enrolled in an elective class in special education at a large university in Australia	Semi-structured interviews and journal entries	Students developed a more positive attitude toward a teaching assistant with a physical disability over the semester. The learning experience broadened their knowledge regarding disability culture and issues.
Dole, 2001	Qualitative	4 gifted college students with learning disabilities	Personal narratives	Identity formation, which is a circular process, occurs within the support system of family, peers, teachers, and mentors and includes four themes: self-knowledge, self-acceptance, self-advocacy, and self-determination.
Ferri, Keefe, & Gregg, 2001	Qualitative	3 current or former learning disabled students from graduate programs in special education who were currently teaching students with learning disabilities	Semi-structured interviews	These participants were found to have high expectations for their students with disabilities in addition to teaching with multiple modalities. The participants ultimately viewed their disabilities as a tool rather than a deficit.
Fusfeld, 1997	Quantitative	422 deaf men and women who graduated from Gallaudet University between 1915 and 1940	Analysis of graduation records and employment data	This historical study found that out of 422 Gallaudet graduates between 1915 and 1940, 54% were called back to residential schools to serve as teachers of children with deafness.

Hitchings, Luzzo, Retish, Horvath, & Ristow, 1998	Quantitative	75 students with and without disabilities from two private liberal arts colleges in the Midwest	Attitude Scale of the Career Maturity Inventory	Students with learning disabilities struggled when describing the impact their disability had on career development. Students with auditory, visual, or physical disabilities could better describe the impact their disability had on career development.
Lewis, Corn, Erin, & Holbrook, 2003	Qualitative	14 teachers of students with visual impairments, ranging in age from 27 to 47, who had taught for .5 to 20 years.	Focus group meetings, observations, interviews	Teachers of students with visual impairments could more readily overcome barriers to assessment in the classroom, but still struggled with transportation and overall planning.
Marlatt, 2002	Quantitative	163 preservice and inservice teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students who were graduate students or alumni of Gallaudet University in Washington D.C.	Survey of Practical Knowledge (SPK), which was developed by the author and consisted of 150 items tied to a 5 point Likert scale	Beginning education students viewed students as peers, while in-service (veteran) teachers were more adaptive and flexible in their approach. Overall, the study found the teacher was viewed as an artisan, the students as subordinates, and the classroom as both an arena and a refuge.
Mullen, 2001	Qualitative	24 preservice teachers at an American university; a professional career woman in her 40s who was a congenital amputee	Interviews	Preservice teachers benefited from disability awareness intervention, which provided the opportunity to process and overcome fears and assumptions about difference.
Renick & Harter, 1989	Mixed Methods	86 students in grades 3 to 8 who attended a public school resource	Perceived Competence Scale for Children (measures	Learning disabled students perceive their own competencies as

		room for learning disabled students	students perceptions of academic, athletic, social, and self confidence)	higher when enrolled in a resource room program. When enrolled in a regular education inclusive classroom social comparisons led to decreased academic, athletic, social, and self confidence.
Roberson & Serwatka, 2000	Quantitative	Deaf and hard of hearing secondary students from the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind and the Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf who attended 22 classes grouped into 11 matched sets (grade level, subject/content/ability); in each set, one class was taught by a deaf teacher and one class was taught by a hearing teacher.	The Stanford Achievement Test (SAT), multiple choice survey	Overall, deaf and heard of hearing secondary level students preferred deaf teachers over hearing teachers. In both deaf and hearing teachers' classrooms no difference in achievement was found.
Thompson & Dickey, 1994	Mixed Methods	College students with disabilities from 16 universities in the U.S.	20 item questionnaire of self-perceived job search skills	Students could not describe how the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protected them in their job searches, and they were afraid to disclose their disability to employers. Self-perceptions were bolstered if students were satisfied with their college major, were specifically trained for a career, had paid work experience, and/or had an acquired disability.

Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, Garner, & Lawrence, 2007	Quantitative	180 students with disabilities from 25 school districts in the U.S.	The Arc's Self Determination Scale (a 72-item self report that measures student self-determination and identifies characteristics of self-determination). A 20-item questionnaire was also used.	Students with a higher level of self-determination, self-regulation, and self-realization experience more success in transition planning knowledge, IEP team process, goals, and decision-making.
Whitney-Thomas & Moloney, 2001	Qualitative	This study included 11 secondary students, ranging in age from 17 to 19, in a variety of living situations, with slightly over half (55%) of the students identified as special education and requiring IEPs.	Semi-structured interviews	Students with disabilities were more likely to have low self-definition and experience struggle. A reduced sense of self, a lack of vision for the future, and limited access to support negatively influenced self-definition and increased students' struggles as they transitioned from high school.
Wigle & DeMoulin, 1999	Mixed Methods	74 learning disabled or mentally retarded students from western Tennessee in grades kindergarten to three.	DeMoulin Self-Concept Developmental Scale (a 30-point scale measuring self-efficacy and self-esteem), and teacher and student response forms	The self-concepts of students with learning disabilities and mental retardation are negatively affected by the amount of time the student spends in regular education settings, with males being more affected than females.
Yellin, Yellin, & Claypool, 2003	Mixed Methods	55 undergraduate Elementary Education majors who were enrolled in two types of methods courses: traditional (classroom-based) and field-based	Opinions Relative to the Integration of Students with Disabilities (25-item Likert scale questionnaire)	Both methods classes and field experiences resulted in no change in attitudes of preservice teachers without disabilities. Simple exposure to students with disabilities does not change teachers' perceptions, which has

				negative implications for inclusive classrooms.
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3.2.1. Research design

Six of the 15 studies (40.0 %) included in this meta-synthesis employed a qualitative research design (Carrington & Brownlee, 2001; Dole, 2001; Ferri et al., 2001; Lewis et al., 2003; Mullen, 2001; Whitney et al., 2001). Five of the studies (33.3%) used a quantitative research design (Fusfeld, 1997; Hitchings et al., 1998; Marlatt, 2002; Roberson & Serwatka, 2000; Wehmeyer et al., 2007). Four of the studies (26.7%) employed a mixed methods research design, collecting and analyzing a combination of both quantitative (i.e., numerical) and qualitative (i.e., non-numerical) data (Renick & Harter, 1989; Thompson & Dickey, 1994; Wigle & DeMoulin, 1999; Yellin et al., 2003).

3.2.2. Participants and data sources

The 15 studies included in this meta-synthesis analyzed data collected from K-12 students with disabilities, college students with disabilities, teachers with disabilities, teachers who worked with K-12 students with disabilities, and preservice teachers. Five of the studies (33.3%) analyzed data collected from K-12 students with disabilities (Renick & Harter, 1989; Roberson & Serwatka, 2000; Wehmeyer et al., 2007; Whitney-Thomas & Moloney, 2001; Wigle & DeMoulin, 1999). Five of the studies (33.3%) analyzed data collected from teachers who worked with K-12 students with disabilities (Ferri et al., 2001; Fusfeld, 1997; Lewis et al., 2003; Marlatt, 2002; Roberson & Serwatka, 2000). Four of the studies (26.7%) analyzed data collected from inservice teachers with disabilities (Ferri et al., 2001; Fusfeld, 1997; Marlatt, 2002; Roberson & Serwatka, 2000). Four studies (26.7%) analyzed data collected from preservice teachers (Carrington & Brownlee, 2001; Marlatt, 2002; Mullen, 2001; Yellin et al., 2003). Four studies (26.7%) analyzed data collected from college students with disabilities (Ferri et al., 2001; Fusfeld, 1997; Hitchings et al., 1998; Thompson & Dickey, 1994).

Most of the studies reviewed for this meta-synthesis used scale-based assessment instruments and/or interviews to collect data from participants. Six of the 15 studies (40.0%) used scale-based assessment instruments to collect data (Hitchings et al., 1998; Marlatt, 2002; Renick & Harter, 1989; Wehmeyer, 2007; Yellin et al., 2003). Five of the studies (33.3%) analyzed data collected through interviews (Carrington & Brownlee, 2001; Ferri et al. 2001; Lewis et al., 2003; Mullen, 2001; Whitney-Thomas & Moloney, 2001). In addition to scale-based assessments and interviews, other sources of data were also used in many of the studies; these additional sources of data included: direct observation; focus group meetings; participant journals; personal narratives; standardized test scores; surveys; questionnaires; and pre-and-post measures.

3.2.3. Findings of the studies

The findings of the 15 studies included in this meta-synthesis can be summarized as follows:

1. Preservice and inservice teachers without disabilities can be taught to respect disability culture and empathize with people with disabilities, but the intervention must be thorough and systematic. Simple exposure doesn't guarantee positive attitudinal changes.
2. A lack of identity formation, self-esteem, self-determination, and self-growth is present in students with disabilities; this lack of self-knowledge and the ADA regulations (which protect students with disabilities) affects career growth and opportunities. Students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms void of disability awareness and disability pride demonstrated low self-esteem.
3. Teachers with disabilities hold high standards and are viewed by students with disabilities as valuable teachers, yet most still face barriers to success in the workplace.

3.3. Emergent themes

Nine themes emerged from my analysis of the 38 articles included in this meta-synthesis. These emergent themes (or theme clusters) include: (a) qualities and characteristics of teachers with disabilities; (b) qualities and characteristics of teachers without disabilities; (c) qualities and characteristics of students with disabilities; (d) special education classrooms and inclusive classrooms; (e) the construction of identity and the development of self in students with disabilities; (f) prejudicial barriers to success; (g) the cultivation of disability culture; (h) suggestions for teachers with disabilities; and (i) suggestions for teachers without disabilities. These nine theme clusters and their associated formulated meanings are delineated in Table 3.

Table 3

Theme Clusters	Formulated Meanings
Qualities and Characteristics of Teachers with Disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers with disabilities can exemplify the transformative power available to individuals willing to take risks by sharing experiences, feelings, and stories about disability, which in turn motivates students and cultivates disability awareness and culture. • Teachers with disabilities can serve as powerful role models for students with and without disabilities, for colleagues, and for the community. • Teachers with disabilities have a vested interest in seeing students with disabilities achieve their goals and succeed in school and life, and these teachers maintain a philosophy based on the fact that all students can meet high expectations, all students can learn, and all students are capable. • Teachers with disabilities have increased patience for students with disabilities. • Teachers with disabilities often have gifts in other areas of instruction and are more likely to use modified, varied, and strategic teaching styles to accommodate a wide variety of learners. • Teachers with disability see their disability as a teaching tool to connect with students and explain disability realities to colleagues. • Teachers with disabilities tend to be passionate about their practice and often work tirelessly to dispel stereotypes about disability and capableness. • Teachers with disabilities eschew the “savior” mentality for a realistic vision of empowered students with disabilities. • Teachers with disabilities can help students understand that disability does not equal deficiency or incapableness. • Teachers with disabilities treat students with disabilities as “normal” and do not pre-judge or underestimate students with disabilities. . • Teachers with disabilities serve as “mirrors” for students with disabilities and they can often identify the “masks” students are wearing, or the student behaviors that hide their disability.
Qualities and Characteristics of Teachers without Disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers without disabilities report they lack training to properly develop self-determination skills in students with disabilities; increasingly, children with special needs are being placed in mainstream classrooms with teachers who are unprepared for inclusion. • Many mentor teachers without disabilities do not know how to evaluate preservice teachers with disabilities. • Teachers without disabilities will understand and therefore explain and relate to disability differently than teachers with disabilities. • Teachers without disabilities tend to provide students with disabilities with more rewards, fewer punishments, more pity, and lower expectations.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers without disabilities often hold stereotypes about people with disabilities, assuming disability equals a lack of intelligence, helplessness, and inferiority, which negatively influences the children with disabilities in their classrooms. • Teachers without disabilities often reject or feel indifferent towards students with mild or hidden disabilities because these disabilities do not outwardly limit performance, as with physical disabilities. • Teachers without disabilities often feel attachment towards students with physical disabilities, which promotes helplessness and over-reliance. • Teachers without disabilities who were repeatedly exposed to and educated about people with disabilities altered their teaching goals, developed more inclusive methods, worked to inspire all learners, and more readily accepted differences.
<p>Qualities and Characteristics of Students with Disabilities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students with disabilities tend to prefer teachers with disabilities and feel that these teachers are more skilled. • Students with disabilities maintain that they are given more responsibility and receive higher expectations from teachers with disabilities. • Many gifted students with disabilities have poor self-esteem, a sense of failure, ongoing frustration, and may face eating disorders and/or drug and alcohol abuse. • Students with disabilities who are taught to face failure and success head on and refrain from excessive assistance (i.e. learned helplessness) experience greater academic success. • Students quickly learn that addressing their disability results in humiliation and shame, adopting a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, and therefore maintaining many misconceptions regarding their disability and a fundamental lack of self-awareness. • When students with disabilities embody this policy of silence and shame, they perpetuate the same dominant ableist perspective which devalued them in the first place. • In contrast, students with disabilities enjoy the opportunity to talk openly and honestly about their disabilities in a supportive environment. • Students with disabilities often receive messages that tell them they are not OK the way they are, thus these students often feel the need to hide their disability to gain social acceptance (i.e. wearing a prosthetic limb or using a SpeechEasy device for fluency). • Students with disabilities can develop a healthy sense of themselves, accept others, and view themselves as accepted. • Students with disabilities often have difficulty forming friendships due to isolation and social stigma, teasing, and negative peer pressure. • Students with disabilities have a higher dropout rate, a lower enrollment rate in postsecondary education, higher unemployment, a trying and problematic transition to adulthood, and still live with their parents one year after graduation.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The number of students with disabilities choosing teaching is increasing, however, success is not a given. • 80% of students with disabilities cited teachers as their primary source of support (positive or negative) at school.
<p style="text-align: center;">Special Education Classrooms and Inclusive Classrooms</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students with disabilities in segregated special education classrooms are caught between the regular education world and the special education world. • Students with disabilities (i.e. learning disabled) feel more academically competent in the special education classroom than in the regular education classroom, thus students with disabilities need to feel accepted by peers if they are inclusive classrooms. • When staffed with qualified disability-minded teachers, inclusive classrooms provide exposure to people with disabilities, thus increasing the confidence of students without disabilities because people feel more comfortable when they encounter “normalized” disability. • When infused with respect for disability culture, inclusive classrooms can provide the opportunity for students without disabilities to see teachers hold ALL students to high expectations. • Students without disabilities in inclusive classrooms can learn how to make accommodations for people with disabilities, while simultaneously developing empathy instead of sympathy, and students with and without disabilities learn to accept differences and move on when taught by a teacher with a disability. • Teachers and students without disabilities demonstrated the ability to understand teachers with disabilities who had speech/hearing impediments after a short period of exposure to the non-standard speech. • Students respond positively when teachers with disabilities display honesty and vulnerability when detailing their disability in the inclusive classroom. • There is a correlation between students with disabilities, the amount of time they spend in regular education classrooms, and reduced self-esteem. • Students with mild or hidden disabilities often receive greater rejection by peers and teachers in inclusive classrooms. • Many students who are referred for special education lie at the outer limits of what teachers in inclusive classrooms perceive themselves as capable of teaching. • Negative attitudes about disability that persist in inclusive classrooms lead to low expectations for students with disabilities, resulting in decreased academic performance and a loss of learning opportunities. • Teacher attitudes – such as attachment, concern, indifference, and rejection – towards students with disabilities effect students’ treatment in the classroom. • Students with mild and hidden disabilities whose presence is overlooked (i.e. teachers have “rejected” or felt “indifferent” to them) in the

	<p>classroom do not receive as many questions by teachers, thus their potential is severely limited.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students with disabilities who concern teachers (i.e. teachers feel “concern” for them) receive more praise for unsuccessful work, receive simplistic questions, and merit additional time and assistance. • Classrooms provide a powerful arena for social change.
<p>The Construction of Identity and the Development of Self in Students with Disabilities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity formation is a complex process involving social, cultural, and psychological factors. • Before students with disabilities can set and achieve goals, they need to have a positive self-image. • Students with disabilities who learn to advocate for themselves subsequently learn to advocate for others, which in turn builds greater self-acceptance. • Students with disabilities who learn to describe their strengths and weaknesses by receiving constructive feedback experience more success in college. • Empowerment, self-advocacy, and leadership is the result of internalizing the fact that an individual controls his or her own destiny; students with disabilities do not internalize this concept and so lack empowerment. • Empowerment is contagious: when students become empowered they want to teach others about their disability and help others empower themselves. • Many students with disabilities become enthusiastic about education in general once they gain empowerment. • The current movement towards self-determination is about truly carrying out the message of inclusion to the fullest extent possible in all areas of life. • Students with disabilities who experience reasonable failure coupled with subsequent success learn greater self-assuredness and independence. • Students with disabilities who have trouble taking risks lack self-assuredness, independence, and maintain a fear of failure. • To develop self-determination, which begins in childhood and supports decision-making and reflection throughout life, students with disabilities must be resourceful, communicate clearly about accommodations assertively but not aggressively, participate in IEP meetings, and enroll in general education classes. • Self-determination, a necessary skill for self-actualization, includes knowing yourself, having a vision for the future, feeling control over your environment, and having self-advocacy skills. • Self-determination is crucial to success in life after school; students with more self-determination achieve greater employment and earn more money per hour compared to peer with less self-determination. • Students with disabilities are more likely to have lower self-definition,

	<p>which means they lack confidence, consistency, and accuracy when describing themselves.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students with a high sense of self-definition describe alternately themselves as reliable, hardworking, persistent, trustworthy, intelligent, and knowledgeable about many topics, and conversely are also able to name their weaknesses and areas of concern. • Students with disabilities who have a healthy self-concept are more likely to succeed in school, achieve success, become a productive member of society, and exhibit greater tolerance for others. • Students with disabilities who have an unhealthy self-concept feel unsure, unwanted, rejected, and displaced from reality.
<p>Prejudicial Barriers to Success</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Society’s attitudes about people with disabilities are shaped by religion, class, age, gender, education, and contact. • Society views disability as abnormal, which results in discrimination, and thus reduces opportunities for success • Federal and university mandates require that preservice teachers with disabilities are accommodated, and over the years schools and universities have accepted the idea of mainstreaming students with disabilities, yet teachers with disabilities continue to face ongoing discrimination. • Teachers with disabilities often do not know specifically how the Americans with Disabilities Act protects them when seeking employment, nor that the passing of Public Law 93-112 requires schools to offer employment to teachers with disabilities. • Many teachers with disabilities are afraid to disclose their disability at work or during the hiring process. • Teachers with disabilities demonstrate that disability is a normal aspect of human difference; most teachers with disabilities would like to be seen as a “normal” person doing normalized activities; however, some teachers with disabilities are forced into the image of the “super-crip,” which means they have “overcome” their disability to gain social acceptance. • Teachers with disabilities have identified areas of concern regarding employment, including negative attitudes of colleagues, lack of communication regarding limitations, lack of accommodations, and inappropriate counseling regarding demands of the job. • Hidden disabilities often face greater social and attitudinal obstacles than physical disabilities. • Inclusive education is not a trend but a deep ideological shift towards including all individuals in school and society, yet teachers with disabilities are hired as an afterthought unlike other minorities. • Society’s attitudes associating intelligence, confidence, beauty and success with the nondisabled undermine people with disabilities. • 52% of people who are disabled believe society’s negative stereotypes hinder their employment.

<p>The Cultivation of Disability Culture</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ableism, the belief that those without disabilities are superior to those with disabilities, is implicit in schools and society and can be seen as one reason why students with disabilities struggle in inclusive classrooms. • Students and teachers with disabilities often try to pass as nondisabled, and yet passing does nothing to fight the dominant oppressive culture of ableism. • Students with disabilities can learn to embrace their disability, and thus cultivate disability pride, when they gain knowledge and information about the condition. • Disability studies maintains that disability can be viewed as a biological reality seen through the lens of a social construction. • Special education without disability pride inclusion promotes the idea that children with disabilities need to be segregated from the norm and stagnates the construction of disability culture. • People with disabilities and disability culture are not celebrated in the same way that other multicultural groups are celebrated. • Ongoing training for teachers must be provided to encourage disability culture. • Disability studies can serve as an integral part of the curriculum under civil rights and social change. • Students with disabilities should be allowed to participate in the construction of disability culture.
<p>Suggestions for Teachers with Disabilities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preservice teachers with disabilities should be encouraged to connect with veteran teachers with disabilities; cooperating mentor teachers and preservice teachers with disabilities should collaborate well before their work together. • Preservice teachers with disabilities should demand the same quality student teaching experience as teachers without disabilities. • To fight common misperceptions, teachers with disabilities must create a classroom presence, display confidence, maintain organization, and be assertive. • Teachers with disabilities should assist the parents of students with disabilities in the acceptance of their child's disability
<p>Suggestions for Teachers without Disabilities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preservice teachers without disabilities need to overcome fears and stereotypes about disability and test their concepts of normality. • Mentor teachers without disabilities should empower preservice teachers with disabilities by using honest communication, reasonable accommodations, and providing an atmosphere that encourages risk taking. • Teachers without disabilities should be prepared to develop the self-esteem of students with disabilities in their classrooms by implementing a self-awareness and advocacy curriculum. • Students with disabilities suggested teachers use the following strategies to improve performance: teach without lectures, use visual aids, assist but do not enable, and provide greater freedom.

4. Discussion

In this section, I summarized the major themes that emerged from my analysis of the 38 articles included in this metasynthesis. I then connected these emergent themes to my teaching practice, and to my personal and professional experiences as a person with a disability.

4.1. *Qualities and characteristics of teachers with disabilities*

Teachers with disabilities play an integral role for students with and without disabilities as they promote self-acceptance, pride in disability culture, and act as role models. Research shows these teachers have a vested interest in the success of all students, thus holding all students to high standards. In general, teachers with disabilities are patient, passionate, and treat exceptional students as a normal variation of human diversity.

As a teacher with a disability, I notice many of these traits in myself. I have a tendency to work overtime, and maintaining a balance between work and life is always a challenge for me. It has also never occurred to me that some students won't succeed; I see them all succeeding in their own unique way. I also recognize that I am a role model for all students, and not just those with disabilities. This hasn't always been the case, though. It is only recently that I have begun to fully embrace and celebrate who I am. Today when I read aloud to my class – a situation that usually brings out my most pronounced stuttering – I don't judge myself on how many times I stuttered. Instead, I reflect on what a teacher should reflect upon, such as: *Did I ask enough critical thinking questions? How can I encourage Bryan to participate more in discussions?* Detangling the shame associated with my disability from my performance as a teacher has allowed me to become a much better educator. Today, when stuttering occurs, I use it as a catalyst to promote dialogue about differences. The other day I experienced one of the sweetest rewards when a nondisabled student said to me, "I'm not going to stop trying on my math just

because it's hard, just like you don't stop trying when you read aloud, Mrs. Hauk." Students – those with disabilities or without – are motivated to reach their potential when they see the unwavering standard I set for myself.

4.2. Qualities and characteristics of teachers without disabilities

The review of the literature acknowledges that teachers without disabilities generally lack the training to provide true inclusive education for all students, thus students with disabilities suffer in these classrooms. In accordance, teachers without disabilities often maintain damaging stereotypes about disability and hold rigid concepts of normalcy, which results in lowered expectations yet more rewards for students with disabilities.

In these ill-prepared classrooms, students with mild or hidden disabilities – as opposed to physical disabilities – are often rejected by teachers without disabilities due to the concealed nature of their disability; this stagnates the development of disability pride and self-actualization in the student. In contrast to the treatment of students with mild or hidden disabilities, students with physical disabilities are met with attachment and over-concern from teachers without disabilities, conduct that also stymies disability pride and self-actualization.

However, research indicates that teachers without disabilities who were repeatedly exposed to people with disabilities and experienced training in disability pride, culture, and studies developed more inclusive methods of teaching and generally supported all students' learning.

In this paper it is not my aim to demonize teachers without disabilities. With thorough training, these teachers can cultivate an inclusive classroom and support diverse student needs. However, in my experience, these teachers usually lack training, or if they receive training at all it is only technical information regarding the nature of various disabilities. This training doesn't

teach the educator how to develop advocacy skills or encourage self-actualization, two important keys to success for students with disabilities.

In addition, the nuances of disability culture are hard for teachers without disabilities to understand; for example, in my class we often laugh about disability experiences, such as when I make phone calls. As a person who stutters, when I make a phone call the recipient on the other end of the phone often thinks the phone is cutting out when I am trying to get a word out. Teachers without disabilities might be uncomfortable laughing about this incident, which happens all the time in my life, but students with disabilities relish the opportunity to share their disability stories in such a supportive environment.

When I shared that incident, a student in my class who has a hearing impediment relayed a dialogue between himself and a fellow hearing impaired family member that rivaled the classic “Who’s on First?” Humor is just one important aspect of disability culture that may be hard to cultivate in the classrooms of teachers without disabilities.

4.3. Qualities and characteristics of students with disabilities

The literature revealed that students with disabilities view teachers with disabilities as skilled educators. Students with disabilities also feel that these teachers provide greater responsibility and maintain higher expectations. Toward this end, students with disabilities who are allowed to face challenges head-on tend to experience greater success in all areas of life. These exceptional students are often gifted in other areas, yet these gifts can remain in the shadow of their disability.

However, the body of literature also exposed that students with disabilities have a poor sense of self and reduced self-esteem. Many are silenced and do not have a voice in their academic planning, nor do they have the opportunity to discuss their disability openly. Messages

of shame dominate their school experience, encouraging many students with disabilities to hide their disability or try to pass as nondisabled. These students also have trouble socializing with peers, and experience a higher drop out rate and a tumultuous transition to adulthood.

In my classroom I have found that students with disabilities contribute to the classroom community and make our discussions lively and authentic. Their unique insight and life experiences add new depth to our dialogues.

And yet, I also note that many students with disabilities have been coddled and suffer from “learned helplessness,” a trait they quickly abdicate once in my classroom. When taught the character traits necessary to thrive – resourcefulness, self-advocacy, positive identity construction, and goal-setting – these exceptional students are usually capable of mastering grade level concepts. I have noticed that my students with disabilities often develop work around skills to compensate for areas in which they may struggle. For instance, a student who has a learning disability in writing and a gift for visual arts routinely draws pictures of his story topic prior to completing his rough draft. He prefers this pre-writing/brainstorming strategy to making a word web or a list.

4.4. Special education classrooms and inclusive classrooms

Research shows that students with disabilities in the regular education classroom often feel less academically and socially competent. Nevertheless, inclusive classrooms can serve as powerful agents of social change if they are equipped with a teacher who embraces disability pride, and these classrooms expose regular education students to high-achieving students with disabilities. Likewise, in these classrooms, students without disabilities can learn to accommodate and understand teachers and students with disabilities, a skill that will help them later in a life. Ultimately, the authentic nature of a teacher with a disability (one who does not try

to pass as nondisabled) pleasantly disarms students and transcends disabled and nondisabled status.

As a student with a speech impediment, I can remember leaving Catholic school early to attend speech therapy at the local public school. In effect, I was “pulled out” for these special services, in a way that was blatantly obvious to my classmates, since not only was I leaving the classroom for special instruction, but I was actually leaving the school. As inclusion became more popular, my speech therapy instructor tried to replicate this inclusive environment by inviting regular education students into the resource room while we practiced my speech. I can easily recall the embarrassment, fear, and shame I experienced on these days.

I mention this because I experienced firsthand the debate surrounding inclusion verses pulling students out, and I can say without reservation that I preferred being pulled out. As I read these studies, it did not surprise me that students in inclusive classrooms experience lower self-esteem. In my case, my speech was viewed as something that was wrong with me, something that needed fixing. When time after I time I wasn’t able to fix myself, I began to feel like a failure, repeatedly failing in front of “normal” students. This view of disability is still prevalent in many special education and inclusive classrooms around the nation, and it does not promote disability pride nor does it support disability culture.

4.5. The construction of identity and the development of self in students with disabilities

The literature indicated that identity construction occurs over a lifetime, but is especially shaped and developed during adolescence. A positive self-image sets the stage for success in all areas of life. Since students with disabilities do not often have a positive self-image, nor do they feel that they have control over their lives – academically or socially – they are not able to develop empowerment, leadership, or self-advocacy skills. Essentially, students with disabilities

need what nondisabled students receive regularly: role models, pride in their abilities, and the opportunity to make mistakes, learn from them, and grow as a result. Positive identity construction, self-actualization, and empowerment will follow when students with disabilities are given these tools for success.

I have found that it is easy to over-assist students with disabilities, and I have found that over-assisting is one of the primary ways in which identity formation and the development of the self is stalled. Our hearts are in the right place: we want these students to succeed, we know they struggle, we are told in their IEP that they need additional assistance. To be sure, students with disabilities do need extra time and attention – but, it is a fine line, and it is detrimental to exceptional students when we over-assist, because it deprives them of the opportunity to develop resiliency, resourcefulness, confidence, goal setting, and time management.

Balanced independence in the classroom also encourages self-knowledge, as students discover their strengths and areas of need. Accessible role models – a key component of identity formation – are vital examples of adults with disabilities that embody these character traits, yet are missing in most schools for students with disabilities, but provided readily for nondisabled students. In my own classroom I demonstrate traits of self-knowledge (knowledge about my disability, how it affects my life, my own areas of strength and weakness), advocacy and empowerment (as I work towards justice for students and people with disabilities), and resourcefulness (finding methods of communication that work for me, such as using graphics in the classroom). As a child who stuttered I felt a void of nothingness about my future, and because of this black hole I had no sense of where I fit in the mainstreamed world. Today I know that we can provide students with disabilities a sense of identity, hopefully eschewing this ominous future and devoid identity for another vision altogether.

4.6. Prejudicial barriers to success

Not surprisingly, the articles disclose that society's attitudes towards disability create barriers for teachers and students with disabilities. Although federal mandates require equal treatment toward people with disabilities, teachers with disabilities still face discrimination and many do not know their rights. To gain equal access, many try to pass as nondisabled or appear as if they have "overcome" their disability. However, this behavior only serves to support the dominant paradigm structure of ableism.

As in the classroom, teachers with hidden or mild disabilities often receive greater discrimination than do physical disabilities. Since these mild or hidden disabilities are easier to conceal, they have not made the same social attitudinal progress that physical disabilities have made with regards to employment. Paradoxically, as schools aim to provide an inclusive environment for students with disabilities – implying their inclusion in mainstream society once they graduate – these same schools fail to hire teachers with disabilities. However, if schools want to prepare all students to be active members of society and contribute to society as a whole, then schools must back their educational practices with employment actions and hire teachers with disabilities.

As a student teacher, I grew increasingly worried about my observations as my university liaison increasingly scored me down when I stuttered. She thought it signified nervousness and a lack of preparation, and when I tried to educate her she was not receptive. In later observed lessons, I rehearsed my speech obsessively and thus scored better. But this oral preparation came at a cost: I did not spend as much time on lesson resources or adaptations. Is it more important to students that their teacher speaks perfectly or that their lessons are varied and infused with creativity? In the end, I regret "passing" as fluent since it did nothing to further the cause of

people with disabilities.

After my program ended, I began applying for teaching jobs where I experienced discrimination directly. Again, I tried to pass as fluent when applying for teaching jobs, and when that didn't work (my true speech always emerges eventually, and I could not fully rehearse interviews as I could lessons) I staked my claim as an "overcomer." I did not know my rights, and I was told by one principal that her junior high class would "eat me alive." I responded to that comment by weakly defending myself, but I did not know the principal's statement could merit legal action. Many principals and administrators were concerned about parental reaction to a teacher who stutters, and they were unwilling to fight the dominant paradigm structure of ableism.

I wonder, what do these same administrators think will happen to their students with disabilities when they graduate from college and search for positions? Why are these exceptional students being educated if the very institutions that schooled them refuse to hire them?

4.7. The cultivation of disability culture

Steven E. Brown (2001) defined *disability culture* as follows:

First, disability culture is not the same as how different cultures treat different disabilities. Instead disability culture is a set of artifacts, beliefs, and expressions created by disabled people ourselves to describe our own life experiences. It is not primarily how we are treated, but what we have created. Second, we recognize that disability culture is not the only culture most of us belong to. We are also members of different nationalities, religions, colors, professional groups, and so on. Disability culture is no more exclusive than any other cultural tag. Third, no matter what the disability or location of the person

with the disability we have all encountered oppression because of our disabilities. Fourth, disability culture in the southwest of the U.S. may be very different than in the northeast U.S. or Europe or Africa, but all of us have the similarities described in the first three points. Finally, we who have worked, researched, studied and written about disability culture have most often begun in the arena of cross-disability culture, meaning all disabilities and cultures. (para 5)

Many schools breed tolerance for diversity and disabilities, but not many actually promote the cultivation of disability culture, as it is defined above. Embracing all disabilities and accepting disability as a normal part of human diversity is at the crux of disability culture. Today many schools mandate students spend an inordinate amount of time trying to change their disability to become “normal.” For instance, think of the child with a speech or hearing impediment who spends hours trying to talk like everyone else, when perhaps that goal simply isn’t attainable for this particular child. Instead, this child could participate in the construction of his or her own culture and celebrate his or her own unique method of speaking. Instead of spending time at speech therapy, this child could spend time educating his classmates, school, and community about different ways of speaking, in so doing developing advocacy skills, pride, and valuable character traits. Since it is obvious that disability is not going away, and it is clear that society needs to accept disability as normalcy, what would be more beneficial to the child and humanity: repeatedly failing at learning to speak like everyone else or educating society about differences?

4.8. Suggestions for teachers with disabilities

In the body of literature, many of the guide-type articles suggested that preservice teachers with disabilities need to create a support network during their program. This support network can

provide advocacy and offer encouragement to the preservice teacher with a disability. Teachers with disabilities must also create a classroom presence of confidence, organization, and assertiveness. As disability advocates, these exceptional teachers should also encourage parent's to accept their child's disability.

As a preservice teacher, I sensed the importance of confidence, organization, and a general presence in the classroom. I do wish I had had a network of support, because then I think I would have been able to advocate for my rights. In the future I would like to become a mentor teacher for a preservice teacher with a disability. Just recently I had the opportunity to informally mentor two student teachers from Fairbanks, and I found I enjoyed sharing both my teaching practices and my experience with disability. Coincidentally, one of the interns had undergone speech therapy for articulation, so upon my disclosure regarding stuttering she mentioned her concerns about articulation. It was refreshing to see the relief on her face when I counseled her on how to approach disability in the interview situation (which she admitted she was concerned about), and how to openly address her difference with students.

4.9. Suggestions for teachers without disabilities

Many guide-type articles advised that preservice teachers without disabilities should actively seek disability culture education, because most likely their education program will not offer such a course. Likewise, mentor teachers without disabilities should provide constructive feedback to preservice teachers with disabilities, offer accommodations, and encourage risk taking. Students with disabilities suggested that teachers without disabilities should teach using multiple intelligences and open dialogues with exceptional students regarding their disability.

I was lucky to have a mentor teacher who offered honest communication and repeated opportunities for me to succeed. She never doubted my potential, and she could separate the

teaching from the disability. At the time, I did not realize her skill in doing this was so unique. I will always be grateful to her belief in me, which persisted even in the face of my university liaison's skepticism, because it gave me the confidence to persevere in spite of the many challenges I faced. Overall, teachers without disabilities should educate themselves and develop authentic empathy for exceptional students and colleagues, recognizing that not only accepting differences – but celebrating disabilities – is the true future of authentic and inclusive education.

5. Conclusion

This meta-synthesis has illuminated the many positive effects teachers with disabilities can have on students. While I have seen many of these benefits firsthand in my own classroom, it was empowering to research the documented influence teachers like myself can have in the classroom. My own passion for advocacy has increased, and I plan to transfer that enthusiasm to my students through social studies related disability pride and awareness projects.

Curricular projects such as these are more likely to be implemented by teachers with a disability. Once employed, these exceptional teachers quickly garner student support. A select few receive accolades from administrators and colleagues. Fewer still continue teaching without passing as nondisabled or adopting the guise of “overcomer.” And yet still, barriers to employment still reduce the number of exceptional teachers employed in our schools. It is a common metaphor to envision the school as a pseudo-society influenced by the lens of education which acts as a powerful agent for future societal change. Without a doubt, many see this stirring ideal as limitless in scope and profoundly influential in possibilities. Certainly, education could be the future's near panacea to remedy the ills of humanity. However, this vision of a multi-cultural and multi-disability inclusive society cannot be fully realized when exceptional teachers are denied access to classrooms across the nation.

As a teacher who stutters, I have seen special education students who feel the same shame and fractured sense of self that I once did. These children are embarrassed by their difference and afraid of their uncertain place in the world. They rarely see teachers who mirror themselves. When I teach these children, their world broadens and they begin to see the possibility their future holds. Isn't this what makes all of us – disabled or non-disabled – hopeful for the future? As a special educator, this review of the literature reminded me that I am a role model for my students with and without disabilities. Today I am resolutely determined to continue educating employers and deconstructing discriminatory practices. Classroom by classroom, student by student, I will work to instill a sense of disability pride in exceptional children, resulting in increased self-esteem and feelings of self-worth that are essential to future success in and out of the classroom.

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