SWIMMING UPSTREAM: STUDENT RESEARCH TOWARD REFRAMING CONCEPTUALIZATION OF LEARNING DISABILITY IN AN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

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Abstract

Private schools can be unwelcoming environments for students with "learning disabilities" who "swim upstream" against inordinate challenges. In this study, an 11th grade student, John, developed and implemented a student-led investigation to understand how he was experienced as a student with learning disabilities and how he may have influenced the views and practices of his teachers. Several themes emerged from teacher interviews such as teachers existing in a novice stage for LD, new perceptions that accommodations can drive student success, and teachers' desire for openness about learning needs and profiling of the "right" students to include. This study, a student-led critical examination of self and system, contributes to the larger discourse on students with diverse cognitive profiles and has implications for school leaders' development of expanded teacher perspectives and improved learning support in private schools. The student presented his findings at several conferences. He then presented to the school diversity and learning support task force, and then was invited to speak to the entire K-12 faculty and staff.

Introduction

In many private schools across the nation, the dominant culture within makes no place for students with "learning disabilities." Valentine notes, "Indeed, most independent schools have worked hard to enroll a homogenous group of students with both the motivation and ability to succeed in the schools without special accommodations" (2008, p. 49). Many students with LD have struggled at elite schools in large part because the schools are either unwilling to adapt curriculum and accommodate to the learning needs of students and also because many private schools actively discourage the application or retention of "cognitively diverse" students. Holding this deficit view and actively resisting the integration of students with LD, private schools are nonetheless finding their population of identified students growing due in part to population trends (fewer children to recruit, more students identified) and financial pressures. This growth coupled with the frequently ambivalent environment for this population creates dilemmas, tensions, and cognitive dissonance for LD students, their parents, and for the schools themselves (Scott & Scott, 1998). Historically, schools cite their lack of training and expertise in the "special skills" required to support students with disabilities and encourage families to seek other schools with specially trained staff to support the cognitively diverse (Taylor, 2008). Hence, the first author of this study experienced the challenges of swimming against the current in a school that does not typically serve students with more than the mildest learning challenges.

Purpose: Shifting the Current

This project was born out of efforts to support John, an 11th grade student, in developing agency in navigating the experience of seeking inclusion in an exclusive independent school, which was relatively new to widening its doors to a more diverse set of learners. Shifting the educational paradigm from a strictly deficit view of learning disabilities to a conversation about accommodating and celebrating true diversity in the classroom could be revolutionary. Clearly, there is a great need to challenge the dominant framework of private schools. Perhaps, these challenges can be most powerfully enacted through LD students, who, with developed self-awareness, leadership, and courage, claim agency and compel their teachers and schools to critically examine their own assumptions, framework, and practices with students who have learning differences.

The objectives of this study were:

1. To deepen knowledge about the experiences of students with learning disabilities in private schools through authentic student voice;
2. To more fully understand the perspectives of teachers working with students with learning disabilities;
3. To uncover ways that schools and teachers can more effectively support students with learning disabilities;
4. To challenge false assumptions and harmful practices of private school educators towards students with learning disabilities, and;
5. To spark a culture shift in private schools towards an environment that is positive and responsive to the needs of students with learning disabilities.

First, we review the dilemma facing students with learning differences in private schools and demonstrate the need for private schools to shed the mindset that students with disabilities cannot be successful in an independent school. Then, we will share the details of John's research project and findings. Finally, we discuss the implications this student inquiry has for educational leaders interested in expanding both student voice and inclusive practices in "exclusive" schools.

Perspective: Why Swim Upstream?

At the time of the study, John was an 11th grade student with dysgraphia and dyslexia in an independent K-12 school in the Northeast U.S. He had been a student at the school since fifth grade. Throughout his school experience he has received mixed messages due to difficulty with reading, writing, and other issues related to dyslexia and dysgraphia. Some teachers embraced his strengths and were flexible in supporting his learning. Others seemed overwhelmed and frustrated with a student who was atypical in their learning and the demands that placed on the teachers. Several teachers expressed concern that being in this rigorous school environment might be detrimental to John.

Public schools are required by law to provide appropriate accommodations and supports for students with identified disabilities. However, the quality of services and approaches to serving students with disabilities varies significantly from one school district to another. Parents may choose private education for a variety of reasons, not least of which are reasons that parents of typically developing students choose private school (small class size, quality of the teachers and curriculum as well as the absence of required high stakes testing influences). Indeed, in a study by Taylor (2005), private and parochial school principals consistently noted that their potential strengths relative to including students with disabilities were small class size and flexible, passionate teachers. Clearly, these are factors that would contribute to a quality education for any student. In contrast, in a study of public school principals, only 20% of respondents were in support of inclusion. The most commonly cited reason for resistance to inclusion of students with disabilities in the public schools was the same as that most consistently cited in Taylor's survey of private educators: lack of "appropriate training" (Praisner, 2003). However, welcoming students with cognitive diversity into the general education classroom is now the standard, both legally and ethically, in the majority of U.S. public schools. Consequently, private school settings are becoming increasingly aware of the legal and ethical responsibility to create inclusive settings for students. In the fall of 2002, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) published a report entitled *Catholic School Children with Disabilities* (USCCB, 2002). In their conclusions, the USCCB stated, "Parentally placed private school children [with disabilities] have been an invisible group of children. This must change" (p. 6).

In his sophomore year John began working with a tutor and writing coach who helped John reframe his academic identity. To assist the 11th grader in this inquiry, his mentor/tutor supported him in designing and implementing this study. What is particularly distinctive about this study is that it is completely centered on the interests and inquiry stance of a high school student, a group that is typically excluded from the knowledge hierarchies of the academy. The critical consciousness of the student, coupled with his claiming voice and power, create possibilities for reciprocal and system transformation.

Methods

Michael Fielding (2004) writes about transformative approaches to student voice research in education. Fielding describes "dialogic alternative: speaking with rather than speaking for" as a valuable framework for educational inquiry (p. 295). He believes research that seeks to advance student voice is most powerful when the student is in the role of co-researcher. This holds greater potential for transformation in schools because it puts students and teachers in dialogue (Branscombe, Goswami, & Schwartz, 1992). Framing the inquiry in conversations with teachers allowed for potential reciprocal transformation of the researchers as well as the teacher participants (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998).

This student-led qualitative study was also influenced by Maxwell's (2012) methodological framework and Miles and Huberman's (1994) approach to data analysis. Purposeful sampling was used in the selection of the student's 11th grade teachers and advisors. As the initial conversations leading to this inquiry project were around the concept of transformation of self and system, John invited teachers who he believed had demonstrated shifts in their perspectives of him or of learning disability in general. The primary data sources were video-taped conversations with four teachers. A question/topic protocol list was used to guide the semi-structured interviews. This was particularly appropriate in that John's unique learning profile strongly advantaged verbal communication and auditory processing.

The student completed four interviews gaining the consent of all the teachers he asked to participate. Two were recent English teachers and one was a current history teacher. The fourth participant was an English teacher who also happened to serve as John's advisor since entering high school. He was John's English teacher in his ninth grade year and offered a valuable perspective of his development over time.

After interviews, each video was first independently viewed by the three researchers, with each separately looking for potential codes, themes, and important or interesting interactions or expressed opinions. Afterwards, the three researchers compared their notes and observations and determined the most salient codes and themes. This process was repeated for all interviews. We employed Wong's (2003) risk and resiliency framework of LD to cross-reference emerging themes. John, as the lead researcher selected video passages he felt were particularly salient to the initial themes revealed and created an edited video. The video was presented at several academic conferences (Dean, Dean, & Danilchick, 2014).

Results

Following the initial analysis, five themes emerged: 1) teachers' beliefs that they lacked the skills to support diverse learners; 2) the surprising value of alternative pedagogical approaches for *all* students; 3) the culture of hiding weaknesses in elite schools; 4) the powerful impact that teaching a student with a significant disability had in shifting beliefs; and 5) teachers reserving inclusion for students with the "right" kind of disabilities.

In the learning stage. Teachers consistently described the school as "in the learning stage" in serving students with disabilities. Several noted increasing knowledge in the administration and school counseling departments giving them more confidence in the school's appropriateness for students needing accommodations. All teachers acknowledged that they had little or no training in

supporting students identified with learning disabilities. Three of the four explicitly described the increase in diversity of learners in more recent history. One teacher described a number of assets the school has with regard to serving students with diverse learning needs, saying, "We are good at looking for and supporting students' strengths." He also described the capacity for independent schools to be flexible in programming and thus more able to provide opportunities for students to build on strengths and follow their passions.

Expanding opportunities for all students. The value of some of the supports and resources that John's tutor provided in his consultation were cited as positively impacting the teachers' practice with other students. One teacher shared of his reframing the goals of teaching expressive communication in ways that supported writing as a process and not as a singular academic product after working with John. "I used free writing and journals with my seniors and I had them just write, write, write; getting their ideas on paper, not worrying so much about the mechanics… I got a lot of rich material from it." Another teacher described a new willingness to consider the value of technology like collaborative writing in shared digital documents and the use of speech to text; tools he previously believed were distractions and "crutches," potentially impeding student growth.

The privacy dilemma. The critical role of open communication and tensions around the culture of secrecy seemed an important factor to the teachers. Communication and trust were key features of what the teachers saw as part of John's success as well as a barrier to the success of other students. One teacher noted that John was open about his challenges and saw this as a key to his success: "You can handle it, I don't think you are embarrassed by it, you don't try to hide anything… John is who John is." However, concerns that this was an exception in this teacher's experience were apparent. The teacher responded that no other student or family had ever approached him to discuss challenges they were bringing into the learning situation. He noted in contrast to John's approach, "I am worried about some parents who are more guarded and say, 'Well, we don't want people to know about this.' " He expressed dismay that parents feel unable to trust the school to share issues that are critical to the student's life in the classroom.

Two of the teachers interviewed commented on the value of meeting with John's tutor either early in the year or in the semester prior to teaching him as a valuable source of perspective about John's particular profile of strengths and weakness. This formal interaction also helped these teachers gain a better understanding of the general concepts of a specific learning disability.

Shift in beliefs based on experience teaching a student with a learning disability. "If there's a lesson for me about this, it's don't take a learning disability as a label that presumes that a college prep experience is inappropriate and/or difficult" (John's English teacher). Several teachers noted that their previous conceptions that accommodating to support a student with a learning disability would sacrifice the rigor of the program had been revised in the experience of working with a student with a significant learning disability. Several described ways that their thinking had shifted with regard to the use of speech to text for writing assignments and their confidence in the depth of learning despite assessing that learning in ways that were different than the other students in the classroom. John's English teacher shared that he was now comfortable suspending certain "biases" he held about the conventions of what learning looks like in the written product. "If I really want to get at what you have learned in my class I need to look below the surface...there I can assess the quality and depth of your ideas… That is what I was assessing." He also shared his surprise at how impactful technology was in supporting John's participation in

assessment. "It was eye-opening to see that your request to dictate essays during class in another room improved the fluency of your writing so much more than even typing could have." Another teacher talked explicitly about new conceptions regarding the goals of assessment as well as the value of the processes of learning through writing instead of simply the product. "The information generated in a 'free-write' where we aren't worrying about spelling, grammar, punctuation was so rich… You can always go back and edit." He expressed reconsidering his assessment to include the value of defending an argument verbally and articulating understanding and insight through class discussion.

This particular student having the "right" kind of profile. There was a subtle tension that developed in analyzing the data where the message teachers sent seemed to consistently place successes John experienced in the context of the particular strengths he brought to the classroom. The message that including and supporting a narrow band of students with disabilities is acceptable also implies that there are other students with similar disabilities that would not be appropriate for their classrooms. Several teachers referred to John's well developed verbal comprehension, expression and retention as assets that made it possible for him to engage and succeed outside of the traditional pencil/paper demands of the curriculum. One teacher stated,

> One lesson I'm going to take away from (this) is that the next time I'm faced with a student with serious learning disabilities that need to be addressed with various accommodations I won't hesitate to embrace those challenges *if* [emphasis added] I know that the student is going to be bringing some of the same qualities to the table that you brought in terms of enthusiasm, ability to retain information.

As noted above, John's openness, self-knowledge, and resilience were also perceived to contribute to a positive academic experience for him and for the teachers he interviewed.

In the following year, the school formed a Learning Support Committee to shape action. John was invited to share his research and presented the findings to the committee. Next, he was given the opportunity to present to the entire faculty and staff of the K-12 school. This opportunity demonstrated the school's willingness to give weight to student voice.

Discussion

The experience of engaging in research for a high school junior with significant learning disability in a highly competitive academy served as a transformative curriculum for the student. The student gained agency, clarified his identity as a scholar, and subsequently took action on the findings from his teacher interviews. Implications relate to the value of youth-led inquiry as a tool to reframe knowledge in rigid systems. The school embraced John's scholarship and was receptive to dialogue. The formalized research component of his inquiry resonated with the values of this system in ways that were powerful and novel. Both the researchers and the school benefitted from the perceived legitimacy that formal scholarship provided and this led to a variety of brave conversations with the school about his challenges and the potential for change, and the school's new conversations about successes and failures in their current service to LD students and families.

Teachers learning from students. This study demonstrates the value of student voice in reframing teacher perceptions of learning differences. Leaders need to seek opportunities to

facilitate the expression of student insights and voice to the end of creating a feedback system that shifts current hegemonic practices to those that facilitate teachers', as well as parents', capacity to value student differences and more flexibly define academic success.

Embracing diversity and self-advocacy as a strategy for overcoming the privacy dilemma. Very little research exists examining the practices and policies of private schools in supporting students with special education. The population of students with mild disabilities are "invisible" in private schools for a variety of reasons. Sometimes the highly competitive nature of exclusive schools leads to an environment where it is not safe to reveal your weaknesses. The results of this study speak to the sense of shame and secrecy that parents hold in fear of putting their student in a negative light. Valentine (2008) describes how this secrecy leads to poor communication and collaboration between school, family and other support team members like private tutors.

Teachers in this study spoke about the need for trust and open communication so they could be as effective as possible in supporting students effectively. This trust must become a school-wide objective so that students are safe in sharing their authentic struggles. Additionally, it is the hope of these authors that the action steps developed with teachers will seek to address ways that the school can increase its capacity to develop trusting relationships with parents. All of this of course exists in the context of the rights of parents and students to privacy and federal protections under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Hence, the privacy dilemma.

A call to action for school leaders. The findings of this study have significant implications for ethics and leadership, certainly within private schools, but also for public schools. A central goal of education should be to create conditions within a school system so that students can learn and develop at an optimal rate. Leaders have the responsibility to ensure that teachers have the framework and tools necessary to understand and respond to the needs of their students in a differentiated way with appropriate scaffolds and accommodations. For leaders to be hands off with teachers about these issues means they are engaging in malpractice of neglect. John's experiences highlight the need for schools to release the myth that there is a mystical place "somewhere else" where a bright student with significant disabilities could be more successful. To the surprise of some, John was successful when the school responded flexibly to his unique challenges. Regardless of whether a student has a label of dyslexia, ADHD, dyscalculia, or an idiosyncratic learning profile that presents varying strengths and challenges, school leaders and teachers must make every effort to foster an environment where all students receive the necessary support and encouragement so they can be fully curious and focused on their own learning. To that end, school leaders must help teachers construct new frameworks that de-emphasize specious concepts like rigor and achievement and emphasize outcomes such as innovation, learning, and complexity.

At many private schools, heads of school typically do not act as instructional leaders, spending much of their time on administration and fundraising. Indeed, the issue of improving a school's response to the needs of typical and diverse students provides an opportunity for school leaders to reclaim a position of instructional leadership and, further, become an instructional facilitator.

The authors propose that working with schools to reduce the stigma and demystify the concept of learning disabilities for parents, teachers, and students might support increased openness and reduce fear on all sides. It is hoped that John's willingness to share his story as a

way to give voice to this invisible population may also be of value to parents and students who guard their learning challenges for fear of negative repercussions.

Finally, the particular value of student-led inquiry as a means to increase agency for a marginalized population should be considered in combating the challenges that may result as part of the stigma of learning disability (Burden, 2008). John has a loud voice and through his research he will be heard (Fielding, 2004). This study contributed to a fuller sense of scholarly identity for John and created a splash in his school, if not a shift in the current.

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