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PUSHING ME THROUGH

A POETIC REPRESENTATION

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Abstract

For many children and adults labeled learning disabled (LD), the very process of being identified and eventually labeled is oriented to as difficult to understand, disorienting, and just a taken-for-granted part of a system that names some 'normal', even gifted, while others are named abnormal. Minimal research exists that attends to the ways in which the official ways of talking about LDs are worked up in the everyday language of those most involved in the special education process, particularly the students themselves. Thus, in this article, we present, in an alternative form of writing (Richardson, 1997), a poetic representation of the words and experiences of one of our participants – Katrina – a student who participated in our research study.

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PUSHING ME THROUGH

A POETIC REPRESENTATION

JESSICA N. LESTER AND RACHAEL E. GABRIEL

**Sometimes
I don't think a learning disability is really something**

**Sometimes
I think they put it in my head**

And that's how I'm going to be the rest of their life.

- Katrina (pseudonym), 22 years old, research participant

For many children and adults labeled learning disabled (LD), the very process of being identified and eventually labeled is a difficult to understand, disorienting, and simply taken-for-granted part of a system that names some “normal,” even “gifted,” while others are named “abnormal” and “disordered.” In previous papers (Gabriel & Lester, in press; Lester & Gabriel, in press), we presented findings and reflections from our larger research project focused on the experiences of those school officials, psychologists, parents, teacher educators, and students who participate in special education meetings within the United States; meetings which, for many, result in naming a child disabled (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2000). While a plethora of research, manuals, workshops, and seminars exist describing the ways in which such meetings should be pursued, minimal research exists that attends to how the official ways of talking about LDs are worked up in the everyday language of those most involved in the special education process, particularly the students themselves. Thus, in this article, we present, in an alternative form of writing (Richardson, 1997), a poetic representation of the experiences

of one of our participants – Katrina (pseudonym approved by participant) – a former special education student who participated in our larger research study.

THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDINGS

We positioned our understanding of disability within a social-relational model of disability (Thomas, 2004), orienting to disability as a social construct situated at the nexus of biology and culture. As such, we acknowledge that disability quite often functions as a “form of oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional wellbeing” (Thomas, 1999, p. 60). We do not deny the reality of bodily impairments (Davis, 1995), rather we argue that the notion of “disability” is constructed in the space between an individual and a community/society which places limits and/or constraints on one’s way of being or ability to participate in activities. So, for the purposes of this project, we were committed to problematizing the very practice of labeling one’s way of being disabled, giving particular focus to the notion of “LD.” We orient then to LDs as constructs that are always already embedded in particular histories, discourses, and institutionalized practices.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Within our broader research project, we conducted 15 in-depth interviews with those who had been involved in special education meetings. Our participants included seven special education teacher educators, two psychologists, one general educator, four parents, and one student. We focus here on the analysis of the student participant’s interview data. We do this for two reasons: (1) there remains a need to give attention to the individuals who are being named disabled, as they are often not the focus of attention at such meetings and the literature in general, and (2) as qualitative researchers we were particularly struck by all she shared and taught us during the interview process. Over the course of four days, I (Jessica) interviewed Katrina. While we followed a protocol during the first interview, what evolved over the course of several days was spontaneous and

came indeed from a place of relationship and trust (Ellis, 2007), moving us far beyond the questions we had crafted within our interview protocol.

Throughout our analysis of the interviews with Katrina, we were troubled at times, which compelled us to share her experiences in ways that represented what she named a “hurtful” educational experience. We framed our analysis of her interviews in ways that attended to relationships of power across structure and discourse, working, the best we knew how, to engage in recursive reflexivity (Hertz, 1997). As we worked to maintain a relationship of reciprocity with her, we learned the importance of sharing the unfolding ways that we decided to represent our analysis of her data (Flyvberg, 2001). Throughout the analysis and data collection, we learned that relationships of reciprocity often do not unfold when, where, and how we expect them to. Instead, they often come in unexpected conversations that unfold as we – the researcher(s) and the research participant – develop relationships of trust, openness, and humility. As Katrina spoke to us face-to-face and again and again as we listened and re-listened to her interview data, we stood witness to pain re-lived, re-remembered over and over again.

We decided to privilege the storied life of Katrina, believing that as we re-tell the lifeworlds of others, we are often gifted with remembering that “many worlds are possible, that meaning and reality are created and not discovered, that negotiation is the art of constructing new meanings” (Bruner, 1986, p. 149). More specifically, we chose to poetically represent her experiences, believing that such a representation works to complicate and perhaps even speak back to dominant discourses surrounding the very meaning of special education and being named disabled. This format allowed us to represent the phrases and images from her interviews that struck us, and to weave together excerpts from her particular way of talking and making sense of her experience as a person in school with an LD label.

We began the process of creating this text by coding the interview data and applying sociologically constructed and in-vivo codes (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Rather than searching for themes or patterns across the interview data, we noted moments in which Katrina’s responses or ways of talking about her experience represented a departure from the dominant narrative of special education in US public schools. We were struck over and

over again by the phrases she chose and the images she created for us with her words. We thus sought to weave some of them together in a poetic format with both our voices intertwined. We shared drafts and the final version of the poetic representation with Katrina, inviting her feedback and critique.

Poetry, as a genre, allowed us to offer the phrases and words that struck us, tied together by rhythm and spacing, for the reader to hear and consider. This represents a departure from traditional academic representations of the words of participants in which their words are literally wrapped up in the language of academic writers, often as embedded quotations. In the poem below, italicized words represent the words of the researchers and those in normal font are Katrina's. As we share our poetic representation, we do not aim to write in neat and tidy ways; rather, we work to represent a messy and complicated retelling. Further, we acknowledge that Katrina's story does not represent the experiences of *all* individuals who have participated in the special education process. Nonetheless, we argue that her story functions to challenge taken-for-granted knowledges. Yet, we also recognize that for every story told, there is a story untold (Krog, 1998). So, we invite the reader to fill in the gaps, identify alternative stories, and imagine different conclusions.

THE START OF TAKING IT ALL AWAY: PUSHING ME THROUGH

*The place of naming
the "other"
disabled
starts with a meeting
experts gathered,*

*"to help"
the storyline they tout
no other way to help
apparently.*

Yep
I know that place
Seven years old
That was my start
The start of taking it all away
They thought I couldn't do it
Didn't tell me why

Labeled me
Pulled me out of class
On their time
Had no choice
Just put me in there
The "Special" room
Everyone called it "the retard room"
Can't push someone into that room
It's not right
but
 It's what they thought
 Not what I thought
 It's what they thought was best
 That's how it was gonna be.

Teachers didn't have to deal with me
Didn't have to do anything
They took it away from me
Never really learned to read
Not till after high school

Why?
Why didn't they just make me do it?
Wish I would have been pushed more
Not just pushed thru.

First special teacher cared
Tried to teach me
But I got older and
Understood
I was learning disabled
didn't feel smart then

High school came
Walked in
Wanted it over

Always had to watch what I did
Couldn't ever just be
Played it safe
Never put myself out there
Never felt good
Hurts

Why do I have a learning disability?
Why?
What is it that I can't do?
Is my brain different?
Did my parents do something different with me?
Is it genetic?

[*whispers*]

'Cuz sometimes
I don't think a learning disability is really something
Sometimes
I think they put it in my head
And that's how I'm going to be the rest of their life.
I can't fix it

The label defined me
And someday
somedays
I thought about it
Seriously thought about it
Almost every night
I can end this now
Won't even have to worry about it.
End it
But thought about all the things I want to do in life
The things I feel like I can't do
'Cuz I don't have the skills to do it.

High school was over
Relief off my shoulder
No more feeling insecure?
Not true.
It goes on
Insecure no matter what
Didn't accomplish anything

I see why people drop out and go to jail
Who wants to go to school every day
Scared
Nervous

Can't blame myself.
No one asked me
Just made me go

It's what they thought
Not what I thought
It's what they thought was best
That's how it was gonna be.

I got something to say
Teachers
Ask students what they want
Ask them what they need help with

ASK THEM!

"Do you feel like you're struggling?
Can we help you?"

ASK THEM!

What do you want me to do?
What do **YOU** want?

If you're gonna make these kids go
Help them
Don't push them thru.
You don't understand what you're doing

The place of naming
the "other"
disabled
starts with a meeting
experts gathered,
"to help"
the storyline they tout
no other way to help
apparently.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The dominant ways of talking about and making sense of notions of special education, individualized (special) education plans, accommodations, modifications, and resource classrooms positions institutionalized practices of diagnosis, labeling and tracking as “helpful” and “necessary,” with expertise and authority placed within the institution, rather than the individual. This is perhaps most evident in the fact that students are so rarely present (Myers & Eisenman, 2005) at the meetings in which they are officially labeled disabled and placed into a special education system. Our in-depth interviews with Katrina presented us with the words, phrases and images that not only create a counter-narrative to the traditional story of special education, but also disrupt the very notions of “help” and “service” connected with and to special education. In addition to presenting our analysis of our interview data in various venues, including performance spaces, academic journals, conferences and research courses (Lester & Gabriel, in press), we felt compelled to share Katrina’s words with a wider audience in a format in which we might challenge readers to reimagine the experiences of a student labeled LD within a US public school. In representing her words as poetry, we aimed to highlight the ways that understandings of LDs, which are often clean-cut in their clinical, legal, medical, and technical applications, might be reframed in terms of the power associated with naming someone else’s way of learning as disabled.

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