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# Adolescent Perceptions of Educators with Physical Challenges

Marie Beattie<sup>1</sup>

In 1987, I had a massive stroke, possibly caused by a brain tumor. Before this, I had been a special education teacher for 13 years. The stroke caused me to have to relearn basic math, language, and motor functions. With extensive therapy over the next year and a half, I achieved a partial recovery. I then sought employment at a self-contained private high school. My disability was too severe for me to be hired as a teacher; however, I was allowed to volunteer in the classroom as an aide. I found I still had a good rapport with students. I believed I could still teach them, but I was not sure of their attitude towards me. They seemed to enjoy the time they spent with me. Still I was not sure if they felt sorry for me, or if they were impressed with what I had managed to accomplish. I wondered how much of their attitude toward me was the result of my handicap, and how much was from my abilities. Was their kindness just a sign of good manners? Would they have been comfortable with me if I had actually been their teacher? These questions led to the following research.

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of physically challenged educators' disabilities on their students, focusing specifically on the attitudes of both male and female public high school students in 9th through 12th grades. Due to the lack of reports in the literature concerning nondisabled students' perceptions of teachers or non-teaching faculty who are categorized as disabled, there is little information beyond case studies of physically challenged teachers incorporating their disability into their work life. The question remains: How does that disability affect students from the students' points-of-view?

Individuals with disabilities within education professions in the United States are a substantial presence.<sup>2</sup> They are graduate students, practitioners, educators on leave, as well as those who have left the field entirely. They include teachers, counselors, professors, and administrators. Some of them were disabled prior to beginning their careers with disabilities such as learning disabilities, deafness or hearing loss, cerebral palsy, blindness or visual impairments, and polio. Other educators acquired their impairments well into their careers, for example, through cancer, multiple sclerosis, strokes, and lupus. Most educators with disabilities, though, would see themselves as professionals first and disabled persons second, and their priority, in most cases, is on providing quality education to their students.

Educators with disabilities can provide excellent role models for students with disabilities.<sup>3</sup> Their presence can influence the perceptions and the attitudes of both fellow staff members and students, helping them to develop appraisals of which limitations go with which disabilities under what circumstances and to what effects,

including, possibly, whether any of these differences really matter. For these reasons and others, Keller, Anderson, and Karp have urged that people with disabilities should be actively recruited into educational professions, encouraged in their preparation as educators in institutions of higher learning, and supported during their practice as professionals.<sup>4</sup>

One might assume that for some students their teacher's disability would evoke feelings of sympathy or empathy while in others it could produce fear and discomfort. During the debates about the integration or inclusion of students with disabilities into general education some years ago, authors such as Kauffman noted that teachers could be resistant to having special education students in their classrooms, a concern that may be reappearing today with the high stakes testing of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Is the reverse true? What do the students of teachers with disabilities see first: the disability or the teacher?

## Methods

A questionnaire using a five-point Likert-type scale was used to assess the attitudes of a sample of students from high schools in six regions in Texas. The six questions were: (1) Do you think you have learned to handle life better because you have had a disabled teacher? (2) Does the disability have a negative effect on the way you feel about your teacher? (3) Are you more helpful and cooperative because your teacher has a disability? (4) Do you feel comfortable talking to your teacher about the disability? (5) Does the disability have a positive effect on the way you feel toward your teacher? (6) Are you better able to understand disabled people in society because of your teacher? The questionnaire also allowed students to add comments.

Participants were identified by sending a letter to the superintendents of independent school districts within six state-designated educational regions in Texas. The letter explained the purpose of the study and sought permission to survey students who had a disabled teacher. First, the superintendent was asked if the district had any high school faculty who were disabled and had daily contact with students. Second, permission to survey those students was requested. Third, it was explained that all responses were voluntary. The researcher received 200 responses from those who gave permission and were sent questionnaires. Students were in the 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. Students in all grade levels came from more than one school.

The principals who agreed to participate were asked to administer the questionnaires to students during a randomly selected class period, e.g., period three, or the next occupied class should that one be the teacher's free period. Students were told that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. The only identifying information asked of the students was their gender and grade. The principal was provided with a debriefing statement to be read to the students after administration of the questionnaire. The disabled educators had a variety of disabilities. There were also non-teaching faculty such as librarians or counselors. The study did not include administrative staff with disabilities.

One goal of the analysis was to test for differences across grade levels to see if age or experience in school was related to the attitudes of the participating high school students toward their teachers with physical disabilities. It was decided to collapse the 9th and 10th grade respondents into one group to equalize the number across the

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grades. The totals for grades 9 and 10 were 27 and 32, respectively. Each of these amounts represented less than 20% of the 200 subjects while each of the 11th and 12th grades were more than 30% of the total. By collapsing grades 9 and 10 into one group of 59, the resulting 29.5% of the total of 200 respondents was closer to the percentages the 11th and 12th grade participants.

A second goal of the study was to test for gender differences in the students' responses. However, there were few 10th grade males. After collapsing the 9th and 10th grade students together, a Chi Square test of the gender generated statistically significant results ( $\chi^2 = 7.97$ , 2 df,  $p < .05$ ). As such, the numbers of male and female students were not balanced and were significantly different than what would be expected. Due to this result, none of the questions was tested for gender differences. For descriptive purposes only, the percentages of responses to the 5-points of the questionnaire's Likert-type scale by gender were reported.

**Results**

Table 1 reports the percentages of the participating students' responses to the six questions of the study by gender and grade groupings. Students used the open-ended comment option provided by the questionnaire infrequently but, when used, the comments provided were often informative and extended the quantitative results.

Students generally responded affirmatively to the first survey

questions: Do you think you have learned to handle life better because you have had a disabled teacher? However, a much larger percentage (71.6%) of the female students responded "frequently" or "always" than did males (46.6%). Also, there was a statistically significant difference in responses across grade levels ( $n = 197$ ,  $\chi^2 = 13.81$ , 6 df,  $p < .05$ ). Positive responses ("frequently" or "always") were reported by 63.8% of 9th/10th graders and 57.2% of 12 graders compared with 37.1% of 11th graders.

For the second question, which asked if teachers' disabilities negatively affected students' feelings about them, there was no statistically significant differences in results across grade levels where between 82.8% and 88.7% of respondents answered "never." A slightly lower percentage of males (83.5%) than females (91.3%) responded "never."

The third survey question asked: Are you more helpful and cooperative because your teacher has a disability? Here there was a statistically significant difference in grade level responses ( $n = 196$ ,  $\chi^2 = 23.79$ , 6 df,  $p < .01$ ). The 9th/10th graders reported being more helpful and cooperative because of their teacher's disability, with 63.8% responding "frequently" or "always," as opposed to 12th graders (45.5%). A slightly lower percentage of males (50.5%) than females (58.9%) responded "frequently" or "always." This question generated the most open-ended comments that frequently alluded to students' not seeing their teachers as disabled.

**Table 1**  
**Responses of Students by Gender and by Grade**

		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
<b>Question 1:</b> <b>Do you think you have learned to handle life better because you have had a disabled teacher?</b>	<b>Males</b>	14.8%	12.5%	26.1%	18.2%	28.4%
	<b>Females</b>	10.2%	8.0%	34.1%	28.4%	43.2%
	<b>9th/10th</b>	6.9%	8.6%	20.7%	24.1%	39.7%
	<b>11th</b>	17.7%	14.5%	30.6%	19.4%	17.7%
	<b>12th</b>	9.1%	5.2%	28.6%	19.5%	37.7%
<b>Question 2:</b> <b>Does the disability have a negative effect on the way you feel about your teacher?</b>	<b>Males</b>	83.5%	7.7%	5.5%	2.2%	1.1%
	<b>Females</b>	91.3%	7.8%	1.0%	1.9%	2.9%
	<b>9th/10th</b>	82.8%	6.9%	6.9%	3.4%	0.0%
	<b>11th</b>	88.7%	9.7%	1.6%	0.0%	0.0%
	<b>12th</b>	84.8%	6.3%	1.3%	2.5%	5.1%
<b>Question 3:</b> <b>Are you more helpful and cooperative because your teacher has a disability?</b>	<b>Males</b>	12.4%	7.9%	29.2%	22.4%	28.1%
	<b>Females</b>	6.5%	15.9%	18.7%	17.8%	41.1%
	<b>9th/10th</b>	3.4%	1.7%	31.0%	15.5%	48.3%
	<b>11th</b>	9.8%	8.2%	23.0%	24.6%	34.4%
	<b>12th</b>	13.0%	23.4%	18.2%	19.5%	26.0%

Table 1 continued on next page

**Table I continued**  
**Responses of Students by Gender and by Grade**

		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
<b>Question 4:</b> <b>Do you feel comfortable talking to your teacher about the disability?</b>	<b>Males</b>	28.9%	18.9%	15.6%	11.1%	25.6%
	<b>Females</b>	18.5%	13.0%	24.1%	8.3%	36.1%
	<b>9th/10th</b>	16.9%	13.6%	22.0%	10.2%	37.3%
	<b>11th</b>	27.4%	14.5%	22.6%	11.3%	24.2%
	<b>12th</b>	24.7%	18.2%	16.9%	7.8%	32.5%
<b>Question 5:</b> <b>Does the disability have a positive effect on the way you feel toward your teacher?</b>	<b>Males</b>	20.0%	4.4%	14.4%	23.3%	37.8%
	<b>Females</b>	11.2%	5.6%	26.2%	15.0%	42.1%
	<b>9th/10th</b>	13.6%	5.1%	25.4%	15.3%	40.7%
	<b>11th</b>	14.8%	6.6%	19.7%	19.7%	39.3%
	<b>12th</b>	16.9%	3.9%	18.2%	20.8%	40.3%
<b>Question 6:</b> <b>Are you better able to understand disabled people in society because of your teacher?</b>	<b>Males</b>	7.7%	6.6%	26.4%	26.4%	33.0%
	<b>Females</b>	2.8%	5.5%	21.1%	23.9%	46.8%
	<b>9th/10th</b>	1.7%	3.4%	23.7%	20.3%	50.8%
	<b>11th</b>	4.8%	1.6%	27.4%	37.1%	29.0%
	<b>12th</b>	7.6%	11.4%	20.3%	19.0%	41.8%

There was no statistically significant grade level difference to the responses to the fourth question: Do you feel comfortable talking to your teacher about the disability? Here responses were more evenly split across all categories, ranging from “never” to “always.” Comments by the students included:

“[I] don’t consider it.” (12th grade female)

“I don’t feel its [sic] necessary.” (12th grade male)

“It’s not an issue.” (11th grade male)

Quantitative responses by gender were similar to those by grade level.

The fifth survey question restated the second in a positive way, inquiring as to whether a teacher’s disability had a positive effect on the students’ feelings toward her or him. There was no statistically significant grade level difference in responses. When looking at these two questions, it is important to observe the patterns of responses. When the effect was stated in the negative, students were emphatic that their teacher’s disability “rarely” or “never” had a negative impact. When stated as a positive effect, the students’ responses were not as strong. Across grade levels, between 56.0% and 61.1% responded “frequently” or “always.” A slightly higher percentage of males (61.1%) than females (57.1%) responded in this manner. Three students provided additional comments suggesting that their teachers’ disability did not have any effect one way or the other.

The final survey question asked: Are you better able to understand disabled people in society because of your teacher? Here there was

a statistically significant grade level difference in the responses ( $n = 200$ ,  $\chi^2 = 11.48$ , 4 df,  $p < .05$ ). For 9th/10th graders, 71.1% responded “frequently” or “always” compared to 66.1% of 11th graders and 60.8% of 12th graders. Female students also responded more positively to this item (70.7%) than did males (59.4%). One 12th grade male commented: “I’ve always accepted a person (or people) if they were disabled or not.”

### Conclusion

This study was exploratory, addressing a topic that has not been investigated previously: the perceptions of adolescents toward educators with physical disabilities. To do so, the researcher administered a self-developed survey to a sample of 200 public high school students in Texas. Results were reported by grade level and gender. Overall the attitudes expressed by the students to their physically challenged teachers showed that the disability not only did not have a negative impact but, for the most part, the impact as stated by the students was positive. In addition, some students took pains to write comments that indicated respect for the teacher as a teacher and not as a disabled person. They were careful to observe that their ability to judge someone was not colored by the person’s disability. It appears to this researcher that this is an important area of research that needs to be extended. Elucidating the factors that help to form perceptions may dissolve the myths and fears of administrators and human resource personnel when questions about hiring physically challenged educators arise.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Sharon Smart, Nancy Northrup, Bobbie Johnson, and Clayton Keller for their assistance with and support of this manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> Joanne Gilmore, Diane Merchant, and April Moore, *Educators with Disabilities: A Resource Guide* (Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1980), ED204304.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Ronald J. Anderson and Joan M. Karp, "The Role of Support Systems for Educators with Disabilities," in *Enhancing Diversity: Educators with Disabilities*, ed. Ronald J. Anderson, Clayton E. Keller, and Joan M. Karp (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1998); Harlan Hahn, "Advocacy and Educators with Disabilities: Emerging Issues and Opportunities," in *Enhancing Diversity: Educators with Disabilities*.

<sup>4</sup> Clayton E. Keller, Ronald J. Anderson, and Joan M. Karp, "Introduction," in *Enhancing Diversity: Educators with Disabilities*.

<sup>5</sup> Ian McNett and Diane Merchant, "Disabled Educators: Assets, not Handicaps to Good Teaching," *Today's Education* 70 (February-March 1981): 34-37.

<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, the focus of study was on the students' perceptions and not their actions, which points to a potential limitation of the research. The sensitive nature of the items on the questionnaire also presented the possibility that students would respond in ways that they thought the researcher or the adults in their school would want, and not as they really felt.