INSIDER PERSPECTIVES:
DISABILITY IDENTITY FORMATION FOR TWO
TEACHERS WITH DISABILITIES

by

Michael David McNeely

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Education
in conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Master of Education

Queen’s University

Kingston, Ontario, Canada

(August, 2013)

Copyright © Michael David McNeely, 2013
Abstract

The purpose of this study is to provide a descriptive account of the experiences of two teachers with disabilities in order to report how disability influences them both personally and professionally. My research questions were as follows. Firstly, how do participants understand themselves as adults, adults with disabilities, and as adults with disabilities who are teachers? Secondly, how does disability contribute to their pedagogy and how do their experiences as educators contribute to their understanding of disability? Thirdly, for these teachers with disabilities, what is the nature of their relationships in both educational and workplace contexts? Fourthly, what is their perspective on accommodations? Finally, what is their advice to aspiring teachers who have disabilities, including myself? I conducted interviews that addressed these research concerns with two participants, both experienced teachers with self-identified disabilities. For data analysis, I used the method of constant comparison to create codes and find themes within the data collected from the interview, based on disability identity and self-advocacy theories. It is discussed that individuals with disabilities face unique identity-related challenges aside from the physical and mental aspects of having a disability. A key finding is that participants were shaped by prior experiences in childhood and in the education system that were related to their disability which now influence their teaching. Other findings include: their independence, resilience and ability to strategize led to their creation of their own accommodations: they found an environment that honoured their own strengths. Both teachers found that disclosing their own disability helped their students to better relate to them. However, at the same time, they were not as aware of accommodations for themselves as they were for their students. Teachers with disabilities serve an important role in schools as they are not only representatives of what inclusive societies can achieve: they also have unique experiences and skills that are an asset to their students. Recommendations to expand upon Gill’s (1997) disability
integration model as well as to create more inclusive environments for teachers with disabilities are also discussed.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all students with disabilities,
in school and outside of school,
including those who become teachers with disabilities,
in school and outside of school.

This thesis is also dedicated to the memory of Leslie Doucet,
my first-year Sociology TA, and, more importantly,
someone who helped me to feel like I was in the right place
and at the right time.
Acknowledgements

A thesis is a massive undertaking. I certainly would not have completed the document before you if not for the generous support of others. My eternal gratitude to:

- My parents, as without their financial, physical, emotional, and spiritual support, I probably wouldn’t have even contemplated doing a Master’s, let alone have finished my thesis.
- The McNeely and Fraser clans, including those who have passed.
- The Canadian Deafblind Association (CDBA) and my intervention staff, including a very special man who has worked with me for seven years, through my made-up stories and beyond last-minute rushes—Kevin Fox, the best intervenor ever. Honourable mentions go to Kim Hutchinson and Chantal Levac for their support as well.
- My M.Ed. committee—Nancy and Andrea. You believed in me so I believed in myself. I overused dashes, commas, and ‘that’s’—and that, I actually found myself having fun some of the time. 😊
- My grad student family—Shahida, Lma, Peter, Beth, Leigha, Ian, Paul, Saturlino, Trevor, Lisa, Jessica C., Chi, Sean, Lorraine, C.J., Patti, Christian, Rodolpho, and Jason—I know I’m forgetting someone, so you, too—we can and have done this, dare I say, together.
- Jessica I., for being my time-master and putting your foot down when it counted; and the many others who believed I could do this, including Stage, Brad, Robbie, Quang, Heaven-Leigh, Jeff, Samantha, Kyler, Andrew and Parker: those who kept me company while procrastinating.
- All the people who helped me with my research: the Queen’s University librarians, especially Brenda Reed, Peter Lewis and Michele Chittenden; Trish Appleyard, director of the Queen’s Centre for Law in the Contemporary Workplace, for helping me understand accommodations in the workplace; and Dr. Kathryn Church of Ryerson’s School of Disability Studies, for
sharing her research with me.

- I am extremely indebted to my participants, who shared their experiences with me. I hope I have not let you down.
Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. ii
Dedication ............................................................................................................................................... iv
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................... v
List of Tables ........................................................................................................................................... x
Chapter 1: Introduction ........................................................................................................................... 1
  Purpose .................................................................................................................................................. 2
  Definition of Terms ............................................................................................................................... 4
  Organization of Thesis ......................................................................................................................... 7
Chapter 2: Literature Review .................................................................................................................. 8
  Disability Identity Theories .................................................................................................................. 8
    Gill's (1997) Disability Identity Integration Model .............................................................................. 9
    Models of Disability .......................................................................................................................... 12
    Strategic Disclosure ......................................................................................................................... 16
  Test et al. (2005) Conceptual Framework of Self-Advocacy for
    Students with Disabilities ............................................................................................................... 16
    Teachers with Disabilities ............................................................................................................... 18
  Negotiating Accommodations in the Workplace ............................................................................... 24
    Accommodations and the Law ......................................................................................................... 25
    Disclosure and Requesting Accommodations ................................................................................ 26
    Student Teachers with Disabilities .................................................................................................. 29
  Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................... 35
Chapter 3: Method .................................................................................................................................... 38
  Data Collection .................................................................................................................................... 38
  Data Analysis ....................................................................................................................................... 41
  Limitations of the Study ..................................................................................................................... 42
Chapter 4: Findings: Two Teachers with Disabilities ............................................................................... 44
  Laurie .................................................................................................................................................... 44
    Introduction to Laurie ....................................................................................................................... 44
    Disability Identity ............................................................................................................................. 45
List of Tables

Table 1. Categories and Themes ................................................................. 42
Chapter 1

Introduction

As stated in the introduction of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), its purpose is to help Ontarians by “developing, implementing and enforcing accessibility standards in order to achieve accessibility for Ontarians with disabilities with respect to goods, services, facilities, accommodation, employment, buildings, structures and premises on or before January 1, 2025” (AODA, 2005). This document supports individuals with disabilities by allowing them to be involved in the process of making their environments accessible.

The AODA is only the most recent development of accessibility rights in Ontario, Canada. According to the Canadian Heritage website, when enacted in 1982, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms protected people with disabilities from discrimination, and was the first time a country’s constitution discussed the rights of people with disabilities (http://www.pch.gc.ca/pgm/pdp-hrp/canada/abl-eng.cfm). Many other governments worldwide, like Ontario’s, have been recently focusing on promoting accessibility (e.g., Bargerhuff, Cole & Teeters, 2012; Nock, 2011; Pritchard, 2010).

However, the ultimate responsibility for the successful implementation of legislation like the AODA falls onto the individual citizen—who may or may not see examples of discrimination against people with disabilities or inaccessible services in his or her day-to-day life. People with disabilities, as encouraged by the AODA legislation, are in a position to express their views about such discrimination and inaccessibility. However, within society, do people with disabilities know what they want and need, and are they in a position to be respected and heard?

Schools are intended to prepare students to take part in society and, as a result, are fertile grounds for identity development. Students are in the care of teachers who are seen as having life
experience and expertise in their teaching subjects. Several studies have shown that teachers with disabilities are in unique positions to mentor students with disabilities due to both being members of an often marginalized minority group (e.g. Duquette, 2000; Ferri, Keefe, & Gregg, 2001). Pritchard (2010) stated that teachers with disabilities, when acting as role models, provide “sources of resistance, solace and resolution for the students they teach... Seeing ‘oneself’ reflected in the classroom can be a life-changing experience for a student with a disability” (p. 44). Despite being teachers and having an influential position in society, are teachers with disabilities in a position to act as effective role models for students with disabilities, and can they lead the way to help their students receive the supports promised by legislation such as the AODA?

**Purpose**

Teachers with disabilities have prior experiences as students within the education system and as contributing members of society that potentially make them valuable role models. However, children and adults with disabilities face a number of challenges related to having a disability in addition to the physical and mental aspects of their disability. One of these is simply accepting oneself as having a disability and being open to others about having a disability (e.g., Ferri, Connor, Solis, Valle & Volpitta, 2005; Gill, 1997). In other words, both children and adults with disabilities must learn ways of overcoming or dealing with the social stigma associated with having a disability that can encourage them to be passive observers in their own affairs (e.g., Bargerhuff et al., 2012). Research also indicates that individuals with disabilities who are accepting of themselves as having a disability are those who are more likely to advocate for accessibility rights and who also receive needed accommodations in the workplace and in society (e.g., Bargerhuff et al., 2012; Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer & Eddy, 2005). I undertook this study in order to describe the many ways my participants, teachers with disabilities, express their acceptance as being an individual with one or more disabilities, and to report how they share their
understanding of themselves and their disability with their students and thereby aid their students in their own identity development.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to provide a descriptive account of the experiences of two teachers with disabilities in order to report how disability influences them both personally and professionally. The following are my research questions. Firstly, how do participants understand themselves as adults, as adults with disabilities, and as adults with disabilities who are teachers? Secondly, how does disability contribute to their pedagogy and how do their experiences as educators contribute to their understanding of disability? Thirdly, for these teachers with disabilities, what is the nature of their relationships in both educational and workplace contexts? Fourthly, what is their perspective on accommodations? Finally, what is their advice to me as an aspiring teacher with a disability?

My interest in this area has been with me throughout my life. As I was one of the first children in Canada to receive a cochlear implant, I have experienced tensions and contradictions in the formation of my own disability identity. The cochlear implant can be seen as a cure to deafness; yet, I struggle with hearing and comprehension often. For example, when I am tired, I am less able to detect sounds and understand other people. Additionally, a great deal of effort is required to ensure that the cochlear implant and other related assistive technologies are working appropriately from one day to the next. For example, my F.M. system, which lets me hear a specific speaker directly, needs to be charged daily and I can be trusted to leave it behind in class on some occasions. With the assistance of the Canadian Deafblind Association (CDBA), I am able to employ several intervenors to aid me with my hearing and vision challenges. My intervenors work with me to understand my environment, especially since there are items that I miss due to my hearing and vision challenges, and they take notes during meetings and lectures, since I am unable to do so effectively myself. At this point in my life, I am completing my Master’s program at Queen’s and I hope to begin a career as a teacher after graduating. It is my
hope that this study will not only aid my preparations to be an effective teacher but also provide insight and information to others.

**Definitions of Terms**

I believe it will be helpful to define several terms before beginning a thorough review of the literature. I use Ostrander’s (2008) definition of *identity formation*, which “refers to the development of a cohesive identity that incorporates various aspects of self (e.g., experiences related to one’s race/ethnicity, gender, ability status, etc.)” (p. 585). Cohesive identity, or a synthesis of all distinct parts of the self, is important to note here because, throughout the review of the literature, there are many cases of people struggling to make sense of and harmonize different aspects of themselves. For example, Ostrander interviewed 11 young men who acquired spinal cord injuries from gunshots. Throughout the study, Ostrander highlights how the men are struggling to reconcile their dependency on a wheelchair for mobility with their beliefs of what it means to be masculine, strong, and independent.

Another important aspect of identity formation that Ostrander (2008) highlights is that identity formation is not static; rather, it is developmental and changes throughout the lifespan (p. 585). Ostrander summarizes the work of Erikson (1968) by saying that Erikson “theorized that identity expresses both a consistent self and a continual sharing of oneself with others” and that throughout life “individuals reconcile the identity they have developed with the identity assigned to them by various social forces (e.g., parents, friends, etc.)” (2008, p. 585). Not only is identity comprised of various potentially contradictory components, identity is also impacted by one’s interactions with others. Erikson (1968) also states that if we can synthesize all aspects of our sense of self, this will lead to the development of ego identity, “a feeling of being at home in one's body, a sense of knowing ‘where one is going’ and an inner assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who count” (p. 165).
Disability is another important, yet often ambiguous, term. In part, as will be shown in the literature review, how one understands disability influences whether one is accepting of having a disability or with others having one. Partly because the definition of disability can greatly vary from person to person, it is difficult to define. As a starting point, I reference the World Health Organization’s (WHO) definition of disability.

[Disability] is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations. Thus disability is a complex phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between features of a person’s body and features of the society in which he or she lives. (http://www.who.int/topics/disabilities/en/)

Each component of this definition can fit into a different model or representation of disability. Looking at the first section of the definition, only one aspect, impairment, is purely biological. Activity limitations and, in part, participation restrictions can be attributed to an inaccessible environment or an unaccommodating society. For example, if I were a user of a wheelchair and could not reach the second floor of a building, how I ultimately answer the question of whether or not I have a disability depends on the context. Perhaps I do not think of myself as disabled unless there is something I cannot reach such as, in this case, the second floor. In this scenario, it could be the responsibility of society or the government to ensure that I am not ‘disabled’ or handicapped in pursuing my goals. The second part of the WHO definition is also worthy of attention as it demonstrates the link between the self (one’s body) and society, creating the basis for a developing and changing identity. Accepting oneself, then, lies partly in how one perceives responsibility for inaccessible situations or environments: from within or from without.

For the proposed study, there are two challenges to a positive disability identity, or the
successful synthesis of one’s disability with the other aspects of the self, that I wish to focus on: passing and heroic stories. In a comparison between queer theory and disability studies, Sherry (2004) notes that “passing,” a term originally used for sexual minorities who pretend to be straight, can apply to people with disabilities as well. In a disability studies context, one is passing if there is success in hiding the disability. Passing may or may not be an option, depending on how visible one’s disability is (p. 773). Also related to queer theory is the idea of coming out and, here, this would be the opposite of passing—stating or showcasing that one has a disability. Olney and Brockelman (2003) state that, “People with disabilities appear to adapt their mode of self-presentation to specific situations” (p. 35). In other words, passing or coming out is not necessarily a one-time action; it may be up to the individual to decide whether to disclose that one has a disability in a particular situation, depending on his or her perspective of how helpful or limiting this disclosure may be.

The second challenge to the formation of a positive disability identity is the use of heroic stories in popular culture and everyday conversation. These are stories about remarkable people with disabilities who appear to have overcome their disability and persevered against the odds. Gabel (2001) states, “Stories of remarkable disabled people can turn into heroic tales that distort the realities of disability experiences. Although I believe my participants are indeed remarkable, I do not believe, nor do I think they would want others to believe, they are unusual” (p. 32). Although heroic tales can prove to be inspirational, they can serve to undermine the capabilities of other people with disabilities and potentially detract from efforts to enact change: focusing on how someone overcame the odds is not the same as ensuring everyone has an opportunity to succeed. In addition, there are some cases where one cannot overcome one’s disability, and perhaps disability should not be ‘overcome’ but rather accepted.

The last term to define in this section is self-advocacy. The literature indicates a relationship between accepting one’s disability and one’s ability to self-advocate (Gerber, Price,
Mulligan & Shessel, 2004; Test et al., 2005). Self-advocacy is defined by Schreiner (2007) as “the ability to speak up for what we want and need” (p. 300). I am particularly interested in whether teachers are able to negotiate so that they receive the accommodations they need in the workplace environment and thereby model for students self-advocacy skills. In the review of the literature, I will describe Test et al.’s (2005) conceptual framework of self-advocacy in detail.

**Organization of Thesis**

This thesis is reported in five chapters. The current chapter provides an introduction to the topic, the research purpose and questions, and the terms used. Chapter Two provides a review of the literature in three sections. In Chapter Three, the method is described. Chapter Four reports the findings from the interviews I had with my participants. Chapter Five discusses the findings in light of the literature review, and provides a conclusion to this study.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

The review of the literature is comprised of three sections. The first consists of an in-depth review of the disability identity theories found in the literature, the challenges and contentions inherent in each of the theories, and ends with an analysis of what I see as an inferred relationship between one’s disability identity and one’s ability to self-advocate. This section examines what it means to be an individual with a disability and how individuals can accept, without shame, that they have a disability.

The second section focuses on the literature on teachers with disabilities. The wide range of topics includes: their struggles with accepting their disability, how past experiences in the education system influence current teaching practices, the kinds of relationships they have with their students, and perceptions of competency for teachers with disabilities.

The third and final section addresses negotiating accommodations in the workplace. There is some overlap with the previous section, although in this section I examine individuals with disabilities seeking accommodations, first in general, and then look at teachers requesting or needing accommodations. The second and third sections underscore the difficulties that arise when disclosure of one’s disability—which can often be a very personal decision—is at stake, and the considerable influence that others’ reactions can have on the individual with a disability before, during, and after disclosing one’s disability.

Disability Identity Theories

Within the framework of the proposed study, I approached the disability identity theory literature with several questions in mind. I was particularly interested in whether individuals with disabilities have unique identity challenges as a result of having a disability. If so, these challenges, aside from the physical and mental challenges of the disability itself, would also serve
to distinguish adults with disabilities from their non-disabled peers.

Secondly, I was interested to see whether there was a relationship between successfully managing identity concerns and being able to self-advocate or negotiate for accommodations in the varied contexts of school, the workplace, and society at large. As the literature shows, success in self-advocacy is often based on one’s ability to disclose that one has a disability, and to state what kinds of accommodations are needed to counteract that disability. I initially held the view that those who accepted themselves, without shame, as individuals with disabilities, would be better prepared to advocate for themselves and others, regardless of the context. This working theory was complicated through the course of my research, and I elaborate on this matter in the conclusion of this section.

Gill’s (1997) Disability Identity Integration Model

Gill (1997), a clinical developmental psychologist, “listened to persons with disabilities and their allies talk about their pursuit of integration, both within themselves as individuals and socially as minority people navigating the cultural mainstream” (p. 41). From this process of listening and engaging with her clients, she recognized that they often felt isolated from mainstream society due to having disabilities, and that these disabilities were simultaneously a source of both pride and shame. As Gill states, she experienced “20 years of active identity formation” for both herself and her clients (p. 41). Drawing from both personal experience of her own disability (which is ironically undisclosed in the paper) and professional experience with her clients, she states that all minority individuals typically develop their identity in the same way—it is just what makes them a minority (i.e., race, sexuality, ability, etc.) that differs:

the trajectory generally starts with the minority individual’s desire to assimilate to the dominant culture, passes through a period of conflict and separation, and ends with the individual finding personal integrity, a proud identification with the group, and a readiness to construct improved relationships in the mainstream. (p. 45)
Mapping onto the trajectory, Gill suggests four stages of identity development (or integration) for people with disabilities. These stages are as follows: coming to feel we belong (integrating into society), coming home (integrating with the disability community), coming together (internally integrating our sameness and differentness), and ‘coming out’ (integrating how we feel with how we present ourselves).

Speaking from the perspective of people with disabilities, the first stage is coming to feel we belong (integrating into society). In this stage, people with disabilities come to believe and assert that one has a “right to inclusion in society” (Gill, 1997, p. 42). Gill states that this is a relatively recent development as people with disabilities have typically been perceived as always requiring charity and pity. This is in opposition to the view that people with disabilities should be recognized as equal members in society (p. 45). I believe the phrasing Gill uses is significant because it succinctly summarizes the feelings associated with this stage, “We have dared to expect accommodations for our differences. We have also dared to place the blame for ‘not fitting in’ more on the creators of restrictive environments, roles and occupations, and less on ourselves” (p. 42). However, it should be noted that, as this is the first stage, individuals with disabilities are just beginning to feel as if their presence should be welcomed in society. Later stages provide further support for this idea.

The second stage is coming home (integrating with the disability community). In this stage, one meets others with disabilities, rather than being ashamed of interacting with them (Gill, 1997, pp. 42-43). Gill relates that when making contact with similar others, many unexpectedly enjoy making a connection with someone else who knows what it is like to have a similar disability (p. 43). This stage may be associated with the idea of stepping away from mainstream society and its normative expectations.

The third stage is coming together (internally integrating our sameness and differentness). This stage deals with coming to accept one’s disability. Gill (1997) relates that key figures in the
life of the person with a disability often “frame the impact of disability for the disabled individual [by conveying] to the individual that she or he should seek value in parts of his/her being that had not been impaired by the disability” (p. 43). Referencing heroic stories can be problematic in this stage because stories of overcoming one’s disability indicate that disabilities need to be overcome, rather than be accepted and integrated into one’s identity. I believe it is important to highlight Gill’s point here: placing too much stock in heroic stories and the idea that disability should be a source of shame can lead to “either choos[ing] the course of exhaustion by ceaselessly laboring to measure up to an ill-fitting standard, or [giving] up and surrender[ing] to invalidity” (p. 43). For example, if one tries to compensate for his or her disability too much, or tries to pass, the stress and fatigue may be considerable.

When examining the experiences of teachers with disabilities, I found in the literature that many of these individuals had made this choice at one point or another in their lives between overcompensating or giving up altogether, most opting for trying too hard to compensate for one’s disability (e.g., Ferri et al., 2001). This can translate to passing behaviour, as the teacher may not want his or her disability acknowledged and, as a result, may work harder than others to do the same tasks.

Gill’s (1997) final stage is ‘coming out’ (integrating how we feel with how we present ourselves). As Sherry (2004) also noted (without reference to Gill’s stages), what is done here is associated with disability pride. One is able to return to mainstream society with the aim of improving it or making it more accessible, and there is no need for the individual to pass or hide their disability (p. 45). Gill (1997) indicates a push-pull dynamic at work. At first, working through the disability identity stages, there is a desire to incorporate oneself with society and, in so doing, cast off one’s disability, making it inapplicable. However, this often leads to frustration and failure, so distancing oneself from mainstream society is the next step and, in the process, meeting with others and learning that one’s disability need not be a source of shame. Finally, one
can come back to mainstream society, “in a renewed effort to relate to society from a position of greater self-definition” (p. 45).

Ostrander (2008) highlights several critiques of Gill’s identity development model. One that stands out as relevant to the study is that Gill’s identity development theory, like many others, only highlights a specific aspect of an individual’s identity—disability (p. 587). For instance ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and even choice of profession may all contribute to identity development and may also cause frictions and tensions with other parts of the self. For my purposes, I take this to mean that my participants may have other aspects of identity as important or more important to them than their disability.

Another critique of this model which stems from my personal experience and is also reflected in the data that I collected for this study is that individuals with disabilities may not necessarily progress through the four stages linearly or in a set order. In addition, individuals may not necessarily be finished integrating their disability with the rest of their identity upon reaching the final stage and engaging in acts of advocacy.

**Models of Disability**

As mentioned previously in the World Health Organization definition, there are many aspects of disability that need to be pulled together to have a comprehensive understanding of the term. The following models, like ideologies, give us a comprehensive view of one particular aspect but can also close us off from considering other models or viewpoints. I now examine both the medical and social models of disability and provide critiques of each.

Beauchamp-Pryor (2011) provides both an explanation and a critique of the medical model of disability. She states that during the twentieth-century medical professionals were the experts on people with disabilities. In this context, “Disability was viewed as a personal tragedy, reflecting deeply held assumptions about ‘normality’ and ‘abnormality,’ in terms of the worthiness and worthlessness of disabled peoples’ lives” (p. 6). As a result, the focus was on
treating and compensating for the disability (p. 6), and not on what the individual was feeling.

Beauchamp-Pryor (2011) unpacks the notion of the miraculous cure, the procedure or piece of technology that can take away a disability in its entirety. In pursuing such a cure, “worthlessness is often implied” in both the disability and one’s lived experience and, as a result, tensions can exist between people who seek the cure and people who do not or are unable to (p. 9).

I must admit that I have a great deal of experience in this area, as my cochlear implant was seen to be the cure for deafness. However, it is with some irony that I note that I will always face challenges in hearing and comprehension. When my parents were in the process of getting my cochlear implant in the late 80s and early 90s, they faced heavy opposition from members of the Deaf community, who have traditionally objected to cochlear implants.

Shultz (2000), in her analysis of the cochlear implant debate, provides a good overview of both sides of the controversy. The pro-cochlear implant faction, mostly comprised of medical officials and parents of deaf children, essentially argued that “ultimately the world we live in is a hearing world and therefore anything that one can do to help a deaf child become more proficient with oral/aural communication is a worthwhile effort” (p. 252). On the other side were Deaf culture proponents who sought “to promote deafness as an alternative way of being, rather than a disease or deficiency that needs to be fixed” (p. 252). Some advocates for cochlear implants put forward the claim that it was a deaf person’s responsibility (or that of their family) to put less burden on society by undergoing the cochlear implant procedure (p. 259). The objective of getting a cochlear implant is to ensure “demonstrable improvement in the deaf child’s ability to speak and hear and thereby better integrate into the broader society which [denounced] deafness as an abnormality” (p. 259). On the other side, as Shultz documents, members of Deaf culture saw being Deaf as a viable way of life and as people who were coming from a history of abuse and neglect in the hands of those who wanted Deaf individuals to conform to the hearing world’s
expectations.

In the process of getting the cure, were my parents and I marginalizing and negating the viewpoints and beliefs of those who chose not to get the cure? Beauchamp-Pryor (2011), who underwent an eye operation to restore her vision, notes the halfway place many individuals like both of us find themselves in. Having been ‘cured,’ we may not necessarily still have a disability (her blindness is gone, but my hearing challenges remain), but we may find ourselves lacking the support and camaraderie of those in the disability community and we may find that those who are able-bodied lack an appreciation for what we went through and continue to experience.

Swain and French (2000) discuss the social model of disability, in particular, how this model responds to the medical model. The social model originates with people with disabilities, as opposed to medical authorities, and “is essentially a non-tragic view of disability and impairment which encompasses positive social identities, both individual and collective, for disabled people grounded in the benefits of lifestyle and life experience of being impaired and disabled” (p. 569). Put another way by Cameron (2007), impairment is re-defined as a “physical, sensory or intellectual difference to be expected and respected within a diverse society” (p. 508). The other important aspect of this model is that a person with a disability is disabled by barriers caused by an environment that was built for non-disabled people (Swain & French, 2000, p. 570).

Swain and French (2000) indicate that the medical model of disability still has a great deal of prominence, especially in “media representations, language, cultural beliefs, research, policy and professional practice” (p. 572). The personal tragedy of disability must be eradicated at all costs according to the medical model—and this can be done by providing a ‘cure.’ Its invasiveness is suggested by the authors when they cite Disability Awareness in Action which placed “considerable and growing pressure on mothers to undergo prenatal screening and to terminate pregnancies in which an impairment has been detected” (p. 573). The social model of disability indicates that the obstacles for people with disabilities—the disabiling factors, so to
speak—come from without more than from within and that perhaps it is the external world that needs to be ‘cured.’

However, Reeve (2002) critiques the social model by indicating that it overlooks the “role played by impairment and illness in the life experiences of disabled people,” as sometimes you do have to go to the hospital, after all. Reeve argues that the social model also overlooks how psycho-emotional dimensions of disability can cause difficulty. These psycho-emotional dimensions include “being hurt by the reactions of other people, being made to feel worthless and unattractive” and the stress of dealing with negative attitudes of people in society (pp. 494-495). Reeve states that there is fear and discomfort in talking about illness and health concerns as this may mean the medical model takes over again; yet quality of life and one’s mental health are also important considerations.

Another critique of the social model comes from the experiences of parents of children with disabilities, who do not immediately fit within the medical or social context (Brett, 2002). Brett synthesizes the literature when he states that “parents rarely enjoy an equal relationship with professionals, often lacking the knowledge, expertise or power to influence decisions, participate in interventions or negotiate the services affecting their child” (p. 827). Meanwhile, Rocque (2010) indicates that mothers, who are often the primary caregivers and advocates for all children (pp. 487-488), often mediate on behalf of their children with disabilities in social situations, in order to give them a voice and an identity where they may not otherwise be able to express it (p. 485). If parents’ needs are not recognized in the medical model and if they feel it necessary to mediate in social situations on behalf of their children, thereby taking on a disability identity for themselves, then neither model adequately expresses their unique challenges. It is interesting to note that you do not need to have to have a disability to take on a disabled identity; students, spouses, and friends (Brueggemann, Garland-Thomson & Kleege, 2005) and personal care attendants (Church, 2006) can take on disabled identities too. One reason for this, cited by both
papers, is that the person accompanying the individual with a disability is also, seen as being ‘other’ or different.

**Strategic Disclosure**

Olney and Brockelman’s (2003) study can be seen as an example of how complex disability identities can be. When interviewing 25 postsecondary students with disabilities about how they felt about their disability and why they disclosed their disability to others, they found that there was not necessarily a close relationship between the two, contrary to Gill’s (1997) disability identity integration model. They state, “People with disabilities appear to adapt their mode of self-presentation to specific situations. They might choose to embrace, reject, conceal, or reveal a disability for reasons other than fear or shame” (p. 35). Self-disclosure is seen as a contextual act and as being dependent on many factors, such as familiarity with others and the necessity of disclosing (p. 36). For example, in a postsecondary environment, it may be necessary to disclose one’s disability in order to receive accommodations (p. 43). For many in the study, “the process of self-revelation appeared to be ongoing,” in that information withheld at one point could be revealed at another (p. 46). Despite not necessarily suffering from fear or low self-esteem, some students appeared to still be navigating and developing their disability identity—indicating that “They managed, sometimes with difficulty, to see themselves as both competent and needful of support” (p. 39). One situation to which individuals with disabilities must respond is the need to negotiate accommodations for themselves.


I conclude this section by reviewing Test et al.’s (2005) conceptual framework of self-advocacy and highlighting how it relates to Gill’s (1997) disability identity integration model. Test et al. examined commonalities in the definitions of self-advocacy found in 20 data-based studies involving people with disability classifications. Each study, in order to meet eligibility criteria, also had to focus on improving self-advocacy or on a specific concept identified in their
framework. Additionally, they interviewed 30 stakeholders in the field of self-advocacy for their input. Their framework of self-advocacy has four components: knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership (p. 45). Their aim was to provide a starting point for instructing and assessing students in each of these components (p. 52).

Test et al. (2005) suggest that knowledge of self and knowledge of rights should be viewed as the base or foundation of the framework, since “it is necessary for individuals to understand and know themselves before they can tell others what they want” (p. 45). I see a commonality between these two aspects and the first stage of Gill’s (1997) disability identity integration model: recognizing that one has the same right to enjoy life as one’s non-disabled peers. Building on this foundation, Test et al.’s framework has a communication component, where one should develop the ability to communicate what one knows about himself or herself to others; perhaps Gill was approaching this point when she mentioned the benefits of meeting others with disabilities, although Test assumes communication with those with and without disabilities. The final component for Test et al. is the leadership component, where self-advocates enact positive change in society in order to improve accessibility for others with disabilities. This is very similar to Gill’s coming out stage. Perhaps the overlapping of these two models indicates that the ability to better self-advocate, not only for oneself but also for others, comes with the reconciliation and acceptance of one’s disability identity, yet Olney and Brockelman’s study (2003) shows that disclosing may also be about strategy rather than acceptance. It is also important to indicate that Test et al. may not have intended their model to be read as one needing to progress through a series of stages, but rather to ensure a solid foundation for potential advocacy work. After considering theories of disability and of self-advocacy, I was left thinking about how teachers with disabilities think about and act on these issues.
Teachers with Disabilities

I approached the literature on teachers with disabilities with several questions in mind. I was curious about whether teachers with disabilities had managed to resolve issues related to their disability identity integration as Gill (1997) was indicating they would have to do as individuals with disabilities. I was interested in seeing whether teachers with disabilities generally presented disability in a positive light to their students, fostered awareness of and support for disability and accessibility concerns, and formed unique connections with their students with disabilities. I was also interested in how teachers with disabilities were perceived by others.

In a qualitative interview study looking at teachers with learning disabilities and how they engaged with the available disability discourses surrounding them, Ferri et al. (2005) reported that their participants resisted easy categorization. In fact, reading this study, one gets the sense that the stories of their four participants, three Kindergarten to Grade 12 teachers and one student teacher, were each very different from the others. For example, one participant, Robert, often used medical discourse in reference to his learning disability, indicating that he felt “very lucky” that his IQ was high and that he felt marked with the learning disability from a young age (pp. 68-69). He also did not disclose his learning disability in the school environment where he worked as he did not feel comfortable doing so (p. 70). Meanwhile, Patrick questioned the medical discourse of learning disabilities, “noting that testing instruments and official evaluations” were unfair and ambiguous (p. 71). Furthermore, “in choosing to disclose, he has gone public to challenge the perceptions of others, including his students, parents of students with LD, and other educators” as he feels that he can demonstrate that he has overcome his disability (p. 71). The authors of this study admit that they “are less sure in [their] knowing” or rather, their knowledge of the general experience of teachers with learning disabilities, as a learning disability “cannot be known outside of the person who experiences it” and that specificity is required over generalizations (p. 75).
What I find particularly helpful in Ferri et al.‘s (2005) study is their recognition of the many discourses of disability available to professionals in order to make sense of disability. They started the study wanting to examine how professional discourses on disability, mainstream cultural messages about learning disabilities, and insights garnered from life experience all had an impact on their participants’ thinking about disability (p. 62). However, it became apparent that all participants, as teachers, were also influenced by their students, so students became a fourth discourse to analyze (p. 67). From reading this study, it is apparent that the teachers interviewed all had different relationships with what disability meant to them, and it depended on how much value they placed on each particular discourse: the discourse created by professionals, the media, life experiences, or their students, with each participant approaching disability differently as a result.

Duquette (2000) wished “to determine if and how a disability and previous school and life experiences influence early teaching practice” for student teachers (p. 215). She interviewed four student teachers with disabilities, who, with the exception of one participant, had experience with careers outside the field of education before looking to teaching. The exception taught English as a second language overseas. Duquette was interested in emerging research that indicated that teachers tended to reflect their negative experiences in the education system growing up by ultimately teaching as their teachers had done (p. 215). She looked to teachers with disabilities who, she theorized, most likely had a difficult time in school as they were enrolled prior to the enactment of disability rights legislation (pp. 215-216). Duquette found that although the teacher participants had varied educational experiences, many experiences were negative. However, they all wanted to enter teaching with the aim of ensuring that their negative experiences were not had by others (pp. 226-227). Their varied experiences of working in a professional context before teaching aided them in a teaching context as well. Perhaps it was these experiences that showed them they could be successful (p. 227).
Using a similar qualitative interview approach to Duquette’s (2000), Ferri et al. (2001) reports how three special education teachers with learning disabilities were influenced by receiving special education services when they were growing up. The authors identify three themes that appeared to affect each of the special education teachers. Firstly, when growing up, the would-be teachers noted that special education classrooms had characteristics that both attracted and repelled them from using their services. For instance, they would be pulled out of their general education classrooms in order to receive specialized services in the special education room, yet they faced shame arising from using those services and from being separated from other students (p. 26). This informed their skepticism about whether inclusion movements would be successful (p. 26). The second commonality or theme was that all three special education teachers, as students, experienced low expectations which had adverse effects on their behaviour and self-esteem. As a result, they strove to maintain high expectations in their classrooms and to seek appropriate accommodations for their students (p. 28). Finally, the third theme was that they did not see their learning disability as a deficit but rather as a tool that helped them to be better educators. At first, “In their early recollections, participants often described their [learning disability] as something that was ‘wrong’ with them, something that made others expect less of them, and something that they tried to hide from others” (p. 28). However, as teachers, they disclosed their learning disabilities in order to motivate their students, showing them that they, too, could be successful. They did not want others to go “through the silence, shame, and low expectations they had experienced” (p. 29).

Gabel (2001) also highlights the importance of reflecting on prior life experiences and using them to shape one’s approach to teaching. She interviews three teachers with disabilities, who each had a complex understanding of disability. For example, Martin tells Gabel that he has a learning disability but does not consider himself to be disabled: “His view of disability is that it means not being able to do something even when that ability has been tapped” (p. 37). By tapped,
Martin seems to be referring to the idea that he is only disabled if, when he uses all the abilities and resources he has at his disposal, he cannot succeed at a certain task (p. 37). Lisa, meanwhile, opts to hide her hearing impairment from others, acknowledging that her hearing impairment is an impairment, but not a disability (p. 38). Gabel believes that Lisa’s choice to hide her disability impacts her ability to reach out to people like herself and that her passing behaviour only perpetuates negative perceptions of disability (p. 38).

Reading through the literature, two commonalities stand out. Gabel (2001), Duquette (2000), and Ferri et al. (2001) all underscore that they believe efforts should be made to recruit and retain teachers with disabilities, as they appear to be in an advantageous position to look out for students with disabilities. These papers also highlight the importance of reflective practice: teachers with disabilities are correcting the mistakes or reducing the struggles that had been experienced in their own journeys through the education system. Vogel and Sharoni (2011) interviewed 12 Israeli teachers with learning disabilities and found that they, too, learned from past experiences and wished to be advocates for truly inclusive societies (p. 479). The authors suggest their study follows the UK and US literature, indicating the widespread value of having teachers with disabilities in the classroom.

Bryant and Curtner-Smith (2009b) wished to examine whether or not the presence of a disability in a physical education (PE) teacher would affect students’ perceptions of that teacher’s competence and the students’ own learning. In one study in a series, they randomly assigned 201 pupils, in Grades 7 and 8, to watch one of two videotaped swimming lessons, then asked them to complete a questionnaire about the teacher’s competence and take a test on their knowledge from the lesson. One videotape featured a female instructor without a disability, while in the other the same woman (who was an expert swimming instructor and also played wheelchair basketball) used a wheelchair (p. 8). The authors’ main finding of the study “was that the middle school pupils learned as much about the basic techniques and strategies of breaststroke from watching
the WCL [wheelchair lesson] as they did from watching the ABL [able-bodied lesson]” and that their perceptions of the teacher were equally positive whether they saw her in a wheelchair or not.

The purpose of Bryant and Curtner-Smith’s (2009b) study was to provide a critical analysis of the literature that sought to understand how “teacher competence, dress, appearance, and preference influenced pupils’ perceptions of teachers’ instructional competence” (p. 5). Appearance can be analyzed here in terms of body composition (p. 9). These studies “suggest that in order to be effective PE teachers must ‘look the part’ and appear ‘fit’, whole and healthy” (p. 6). A critique that I have of this study is that people with disabilities can “appear ‘fit’, whole and healthy,” so that the studies may not necessarily be showing that students are more open-minded if they are examining student reactions to a healthy and fit woman in a wheelchair. The authors cite literature in which people who looked overweight were deemed less competent as PE teachers (p. 13); however, I argue that having a disability and being overweight are different.

Bryant and Curtner-Smith (2009b) discuss two alternative reasons why middle-school students may be tolerant. One was that as students got older and more mature, they “would have come to accept PE teachers with a variety of bodies and so learn more from those who were disabled and perceive them more positively” (p. 6) than be immediately judgmental. The other was that

younger elementary school pupils would be more likely to perceive PE teachers who have a disability positively, and, hence, learn more from them than older high school pupils because they had not yet been socialized into believing that PE, physical activity and sport was for ‘whole’ and ‘fit’ bodies. (p. 7)

The authors, having already studied an elementary school population found that “elementary pupils in that earlier study learned significantly more from the teacher when she was in a wheelchair while, in the current study, there were no differences in learning or perceived competence” (p. 14). In this way, they reported data that provided support for the second claim.
Bryant and Curtner-Smith’s (2009a) next study in the series, using the same methodology, but with high school students, found that while they regarded teacher competence equally, the students appeared to learn more from the apparently non-disabled teacher (pp. 311-312). The authors conclude by saying that

as pupils progress through their schooling, their beliefs about physical education teachers with disabilities gradually change for the worse because they are socialized in believing that sport, physical activity, and physical education are for what appear to be whole and fit bodies. (p. 319)

They again reference literature about the deemed lack of competence of PE teachers who are overweight as if it were consistent with PE teachers with disabilities, which may not be appropriate, but this study series represents one of a very small number related to student perceptions of teachers with disabilities.

Brueggemann et al.’s (2005) published conversation with her co-authors touches on student perceptions of teachers as well as many other topics. Brueggemann (Brenda, who is hearing impaired), and her co-authors, Rosemarie (mobility impaired) and Georgina (blind) are all college professors with disabilities. The transcription of their conversation has many pertinent points that relate to my study, not to mention that it is an example of the kind of conversational style I was trying to elicit from my participants. I wish to focus on a few points made in this paper.

The professors (Brueggemann et al., 2005) begin by discussing their role as authority figures with disabilities in the classroom. Georgina remarks that: “Both students with disabilities and students without disabilities see a person with a disability in a position of authority, and, without having to say anything about it, it’s a way of demonstrating that one can have authority and an intellectual life and a career and all those things” (p.13) All three discuss the concern that over time, disability in the classroom becomes ‘normalized’ and unnoticed, which has both
positive and negative connotations. It is positive as students show their acceptance, but it is negative as students may forget about that things are done differently in the classroom because the teacher has a disability. Later, differences between public school and post-secondary school are discussed: it is agreed that, where public school is concerned with the diversity of learning styles, post-secondary education is very narrow and takes into account only a few learning styles. Being college teachers with disabilities, they can continue making use of the variety of learning styles that were present in public schooling, since they require things to be done differently for themselves. For example, Brenda, who is hearing impaired, appreciates using PowerPoint and presentation notes, whereas Georgina, who is blind, asks her students to speak into a tape recorder for some assignments (pp. 24-27). It is noted that these accommodations serve a dual purpose: they do assist the teachers but also challenge the students to learn in different ways.

Two other important issues touched upon by the teachers (Brueggemann et al., 2005) are curiosity and judgment. The teachers discuss that students will often ask questions during class about how they cope with their disabilities. These questions can be awkward, as they may not have anything to do with class content or may invade their privacy. However, the teachers appreciate that their students have a sense of wonder and do not want to diminish that (pp. 13-20). That said, the teachers express that their own experiences with disability are just their own experiences and should not be taken as a stand-in for disabilities in general (p. 17). The teachers speak about being judged as they go out in public and how being teachers allows them to have some authority over others, as opposed to being the object of judgment. An issue underlying much of the discussion of these three teachers with disabilities is the issue of accommodations.

**Negotiating Accommodations in the Workplace**

In this area of the literature, I also had several questions in mind: is there a relationship between accepting one’s disability and being able to negotiate to access appropriate accommodations? Do postsecondary students and employees with disabilities generally know
what accommodations would be best for them and how to negotiate for these accommodations?

I examine the literature pertaining to student teachers with disabilities seeking accommodations for their placements. A placement can be seen as a bridge between the institution of higher education and the workplace of the school. The accommodations that one receives as a student may not be effective in the workplace, and, as a result, student teachers with disabilities may develop an unfavourable view of what it is like to be a teacher with a disability.

Throughout this section, I examine the attempts of teachers and student teachers with disabilities to receive accommodations in the workplace. This is a growing area of research, so I hope there will be much more research to draw from in the near future. I was interested in the way, as previously noted, that specific teachers in Ferri et al.’s (2005) and Gabel’s (2001) studies were engaging in passing behaviours. Would this mean that they were less likely to receive the accommodations they needed? Were they a good example to their students as a result?

**Accommodations and the Law**

According to the Ontario Ministry of Economic Development, Trade, and Employment’s website, under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act’s (AODA) Employment Standard, which started to be phased in Ontario in 2012 and will be completely phased in by 2017, there are a number of different requirements for employers (http://www.mcss.gov.on.ca/en/mcss/programs/accessibility/employment/index.aspx). The first, already in place, is that all sectors were to have individualized workplace emergency response plans for their employees. Depending on the kind of organization—public, private, or non-profit—compliance to the following guidelines will be expected by a certain date (for public, it is 2014-5; the others, 2016-7): organizations will be required to let job applicants know that they will be accommodated during the selection process; that if a job applicant requests accommodations, he or she will be consulted and accommodated according to his or her needs; and that successful applicants will be notified of the organization’s policies for accommodating employees with disabilities (this

In correspondence with Trish Appleyard, Associate Director of the Queen’s University Centre for Law in the Contemporary Workplace, I learned that human rights legislation as applied to employment can essentially be broken down into two aspects: is one qualified and able to meet the requirements of the job? And, if so, what kinds of accommodations are needed to do that job, and is the process of providing these accommodations an undue hardship to the organization?

Flynn-Somerville (2005) indicates that jobs can be broken down into “essential functions” or the required necessities of the job (p. 6). For example, if one is a bus driver, the essential function of the job is to drive the bus, and to have the required licensing in order to drive it. Unfortunately, someone who is severely visually impaired would not get the job as any potential accommodation for that job would be unconventional or inconvenient to the bus company (such as getting a sighted person to give directions to the driver). However, in order to have any chance of receiving accommodations, one must disclose that he or she has a disability and requires certain accommodations.

It is important to note that even if you have the law on your side, there is no guarantee that others in your workplace will be welcoming or easy to work with. Social barriers are still very much a concern with regards to seeking accommodations in the workplace: will colleagues be understanding and supportive when that support is needed the most?

**Disclosure and Requesting Accommodations**

Denhart (2008) surveyed 11 college students identified with learning disabilities in order to find out whether or not there were common experiences in being a student with a learning disability, how they viewed themselves, their experiences with assessment and accommodations, perceived barriers to their access to higher education, and what they considered their
accommodation needs (pp. 486-487). Under the question about assessment and accommodations, five of 11 students reported negative experiences with the assessment process, which could be quite complex and invasive, and “eight participants reported not receiving enough information (or were not able to recall enough information) from the assessment to clearly understand how the learning disability impacted their daily living” (p. 491). As a result, these students were unsure of what accommodations they should ask for and feared being perceived by others as being lazy or as cheating (p. 492). Some persisted in their belief that, even with accommodations, they would still be seen as lazy, while recognizing that they worked harder than their peers (p. 490).

Gerber et al. (2004) interviewed 24 Canadian and 25 American adults who had been classified as having a learning disability by either legislation or the criteria set out by local school boards. They investigated these adults’ work experiences and how having a learning disability affected obtaining a job, work experiences, and advancement. They found that the majority of their participants did not disclose that they had a learning disability during the job interview and, this is important to note, “self-disclosure is required by law to receive appropriate workplace accommodations” (p. 286). There appear to be two main reasons for not disclosing: people felt that their disability did not apply to their work setting or felt as if they had left their disability behind when they completed school (p. 287). Furthermore, the majority (47 out of 49) did not ask for accommodations for the actual job that they were seeking (p. 287). It is certainly possible that for some jobs, learning disabilities may not be relevant. However, participants held a variety of jobs, from positions in policing and secretarial work to working in the stock market (p. 285); so it is certainly feasible that one’s learning disability had an influence. As one participant stated, “No accommodations … never asked for them” (p. 287). What is more telling, however, is that the majority of the participants feared losing their job, reprisal and exclusion, if they disclosed their learning disability to employers and their colleagues (p. 287-288). The authors’ conclusion is rather striking:
At this point in time, and with the research available, it is difficult to speak conclusively about the prevailing picture of employment and LD [learning disability] in the era of the ADA and the Canadian [Charter] of Rights and Freedoms. Pro-activity has its advantages, and indeed empowerment is predicated on that strategy. But empowerment is not realized when people with LD do not self-disclose, obtain accommodations, or use the laws that “even the playing field.” The choice to have LD or not to have LD is personal and carries a complex set of thoughts and feelings. (p. 290)

It is interesting to note that the authors see having a learning disability as a “choice,” and, perhaps for many participants, when they choose to ignore it, maybe it does not exist for them. However, without knowledge of applicable accommodations, or what one’s rights are under the current legislation, possibly they are not making informed choices.

Church (2006) wrote an unique chapter which was “an experiment in writing subjectively about subjectivity” (p. 69). Prior to this chapter, Church’s research team embarked on a study in order to glean how people with disabilities learned on the job at a Canadian bank, which she terms “Everybank”—an indication that the name of the bank itself does not matter, since it is similar to others. (p. 71). Church writes:

Employees are increasingly expected to learn job skills through self-study using written materials and/or computer software. With its appearance as involuntary and management-driven, this new curriculum is displacing voluntary and learning-driven learning strategies such as learning by watching, learning by doing, and working with a mentor. Bank employees continue to engage in informal learning in attempts to keep up with the rapid changes and new demands of their workplace but they engage in these activities on unpaid time and after-hours at significant cost of family and community life. (p. 70)

This conclusion is important as it indicates that written materials and computer software are replacing methods of learning on the job traditionally used by people with disabilities, and as
such, these employees may be at a greater disadvantage in the future, especially when it comes to matters of assumed job competency based only on one type of learning.

However, the paper (Church, 2006) goes further than that: it discusses the challenges of being a researcher with a disability. Church advocates that as one member of her research team used a wheelchair and had a personal attendant, both the wheelchair-user and personal attendant needed to navigate their disability identities continuously within the context of a large corporate bank: “In the focus groups we hosted, Catherine was compelled to occupy the subject position marked ‘visibly disabled’ with all its entrenched symbology. Wherever she goes, her only real choice is to claim her ‘crip’ identity strongly and positively, or be lost in other people’s projections of tragedy and pity” (p. 75). Catherine, at the time of publication was 1 of only 2 faculty identified as being disabled at Ryerson University (p. 75). Church indicates that for others with invisible disabilities (and maybe herself, she hints) the choice of disclosure is a choice, yet for Catherine, it is not, and she has to respond to how others regularly perceive her. Church also takes time to give credit to Catherine’s personal assistant, Patricia, whose job is described in the academic literature as engaging in “bathing, toileting, feeding, and caring” for her client; yet, as Church points out, personal attendants do much more than they are being given credit for in the academic literature (pp. 76-77) and she doesn’t know how to name the complex work that they do and how justice can be given to the extraordinary job of caring for someone else (p. 66). “She must organize Catherine’s life but in such a way that she does not control it or subsume the privacy of Catherine’s separate existence.” (p. 77). Church’s paper does a great job of showing how one must be mindful of the context that one is studying, and how potentially unseen variables, such as how bank employees would view researchers with disabilities, can have an impact.

Student Teachers with Disabilities

Turning to the experiences of student teachers with disabilities, Griffiths (2012)
“investigated the school practice placement experiences of six student teachers with dyslexia representing each year of a three-year initial teacher training course at a UK university” (p. 54). Her goal was to find out if students faced challenges on placement linked to their dyslexia, if they adopted strategies to counteract these challenges, if they thought their dyslexia lent them strengths, and if they could identify factors that would improve their placement experiences (p. 56). A number of issues were identified for all of the student teachers with dyslexia. A main issue was the lack of comfort student teachers had with disclosing their dyslexia to the teachers they were working with, and that faculty advisors, or what we would call mentors, assigned to help them with preparing for the placement were not effective, sometimes even counterproductive, as they did not take the student teachers’ dyslexia into account (pp. 58-59). Some student teachers had internalized that their dyslexia was a source of shame: one participant said, “I felt guilty telling the class teacher as he’d accepted a student to take on his class for ten weeks not knowing I am dyslexic and he wants the best for his pupils” (p. 59). Student teachers indicated that they would have appreciated more collaboration between the university and the placement and that, perhaps, the university could make it known to faculty advisors (and, if preferable, the placement officials themselves) that dyslexia was a concern (p. 59). Additional accommodations requested included practical modeling of required work, such as teaching and assessment activities, flexibility in how assignments were done, “preplacement visits to identify reasonable adjustments and practical support, for example, Information Communications Technology compatibility [such as reading software or PowerPoint], [and] preparation of topic resources and vocabulary” (p. 60).

Despite the challenges the student teachers faced, they realized that their dyslexia presented unique gifts. These strengths:

related to inclusion of pupils experiencing difficulties with learning, identification and empathy, differentiation and teaching in creative ways. Students drew upon their own school experiences and their unique ability to understand from those pupils in their class
who were struggling with learning. (p. 58)

Also, some student teachers helped identify students with learning difficulties (Griffiths 2012, p. 58). It is interesting to note that the student teachers in this sample chose to specialize in creative subjects such as art, drama, and PE, where there was a perceived lack of emphasis on literacy, and where they would be able to utilize creative methods to engage their students (p. 59). The researchers state that UK teaching qualifications are governed by the Training and Development Agency for Schools’ Professional Standards for Teachers which requires teachers to demonstrate high literacy standards. This may be a source of conflict and tension for student teachers and teachers with dyslexia (pp. 54-55), who themselves may feel unable to meet such standards and, therefore, see themselves as being unfit to teach.

Bargerhuff et al. (2012) use a “case study ethnographic approach with qualitative methods” to obtain data about the experience of one student teacher with a disability, as well as the experiences of the staff who were involved in his placement “for the purpose of designing a more equitable and empowering process for serving teacher candidates” (p. 190). Zachary has “a traumatic brain injury that resulted in partial loss of function on one side of his body,” and as a result, requires extra time to get from one place to another, and also “demonstrated short-term memory loss and other cognitive processing challenges” (p. 191). Zachary, despite receiving accommodations for his placement, was seen as having “yet to demonstrate satisfactory teaching competence” and did not receive his teaching certificate at the time of the study (p. 193).

Bargerhuff et al.’s (2012) study is so compelling because, when reading the paper, one is compelled to weigh in on Zachary’s teaching competence and whether or not he was supported enough during his placements. Zachary attended a university that was known for being welcoming for students with disabilities. The authors indicate that “faculty and staff perceptions generally view disability as a socio/political issue rather than a personal one” (p. 186), reflecting earlier discussion in this chapter about the different models of disability. The authors indicate,
however, that “Unfortunately, a contradiction exists between the university’s articulated commitment to people with disabilities and the actual practice of preparing teacher candidates for work in K-12 schools, where entrenched, sometimes antiquated notions of teaching, learning and ability persist” (p. 186). A reason that this may be the case is that the Office of Professional Field Experiences (OPFE), which allocates the placements of student teachers, “struggles with balancing the needs of the candidate and the fear of alienating local administrators with the option of choosing another area university as their primary source for student teachers” (p. 186). Here, “faculty and staff involved in field placement decisions tend to perceive the teacher candidate with a disability as an added drain on precious time and resources” (p. 186).

Data for Bargerhuff et al.’s (2012) study consisted of mainly “written recollections and perspectives of the Office of Field Placement Director and the special education faculty member who was also Zachary’s supervisor during student teaching” and was cross checked with, among other sources of information, conversations with Zachary himself (p. 191). I find Zachary’s perspective to be curiously absent from this paper. It is easy to perceive Zachary as one of “those rare candidates who clearly do not possess the developing skill to become proficient teachers” (p. 196), but the paper seems to be asking the question of whether Zachary was given a fair chance. I state this because the paper outlines several changes that were made to the student teaching program in light of Zachary’s experience, which led me to ask: how would Zachary have benefited from these changes himself?

Some people were skeptical about Zachary’s abilities as a teacher for what the authors term “petty” reasons—one example given is the difficulty he had escorting a class to the gym (p. 194). This may not be so “petty” when considering that Zachary is responsible for guaranteeing his students’ safety. In his Phase II experience, two students suffered minor injuries under his care, and his supervisor stated that Zachary “forgot where he was in a lesson, […] he forgot to address a student’s question [and] taught material that was simply inaccurate or misleading, [and
therefore] acted as a disservice to the students for whom he was responsible” (p. 195). Zachary also did not show up to “concern conferences,” which were convened in order to assist him in the program. Reasons he did not attend included transportation difficulties, illness, and also because he simply forgot that they were happening (p. 191).

The authors (Bargerhuff et al., 2012) indicated that, as a result of Zachary’s experience, modifications were made to the teacher education program in order to better serve everyone involved. A key issue was recognizing whether or not one was competent to be a teacher early enough to not waste time and energy (p. 196). Another issue raised was that “concern conferences” were antithetical to the university’s inclusive mandate and “served to maintain the status quo, viewing candidates through a lens of deficiency” and “perpetuated stereotypical reactions in which those in power acted ‘on’ rather than ‘with candidates, treating them with benevolence, pity or skepticism rather than respect” (p. 196). I wonder if this could be a reason why Zachary did not attend some meetings. The authors indicate that these concern conferences were replaced with a proactive transdisciplinary team model, and this team had, as its centre, the student teacher, who would be given a great deal of responsibility and access to a variety of professionals (including a representative from the university’s disability services and a vocational rehabilitation representative) and the flexibility to address concerns of any member within that team (pp. 196-197).

The authors (Bargerhuff et al., 2012) raise several interesting points about what is expected of teacher candidates with disabilities and, therefore, teachers with disabilities. The first is that they should disclose their disability.

The choice to disclose a disability belongs to the individual; however, to receive the maximum benefit from the university experience and the teacher education programme in particular, one will need to be forthright from the beginning. Reticence towards adoption of a ‘disabled identity’ … serves to perpetuate the myth of incompetence. Alternatively,
students who engage in disability politics, personally or publically, garner a higher likelihood of developing traits that will serve them well in college and beyond. In fact, the successful teacher candidate assumes a leadership role in making decisions not only about his own performance needs and strengths but also in regard to the children he teaches. Designing and assessing learning experiences, managing classroom behavior, and being part of a collaborative team are not suitable tasks for someone who is over-dependent on others. (pp. 200-201).

This is an interesting counterpoint to the variety of papers that have discussed reasons not to disclose one’s disability (e.g. Gerber et al., 2004, a reason being fear of losing one’s job). It is also intriguing that not disclosing is equivalent to being over-dependent on others. Additionally, teacher candidates need “to come to the university with certain traits well established” and these “include self-determination, awareness of one’s own abilities and weaknesses, an ability to clearly articulate what one needs to learn, and a willingness to teach others about one’s disability” (Bargerhuff et al., 2012, p. 200). The authors write:

Candidates should seize this opportunity to take charge of the process to clearly communicate their own strengths, needs and preferences with regard to all aspects of the field placement. The authors’ experience, however, in Zachary’s case as well as more recent attempts to serve college students with disabilities, reveals many candidates’ reluctance or inability to take this charge. (p. 198)

The authors indicate that perhaps it is learned helplessness or the way that “students with disabilities are used to being ‘done for’ or ‘done to’, but not ‘with’ and rarely do they act on their own initiative” (p. 188) that causes the lack of awareness of one’s strengths and weaknesses as a professional in charge of the care of children.

I wish to complete my discussion of Bargerhuff et al.’s (2012) study by noting what they stated about the importance of teacher mentors who have disabilities for student candidates with
disabilities. In a subheading of ‘Role models,’ the authors write:

A display of skepticism about the potential of persons with disabilities to become effective teachers from those who have not been trained in the area of disability should not surprise transdisciplinary team members. Searching out practicing teachers in the area who do have disabilities provides role models and potential mentors for the teacher candidate. These professionals contribute considerable insight into the process. (p. 202).

The authors continue by stating that networking with other disabled professionals allows for the sharing of resources and the reduction of feelings of anxiety and apprehension (p. 202).

In the workplace, as well as in a university or college setting, where one is required to ask for accommodations to get them, knowledge about one’s disability is essential. However, whether one is wholly open about having a disability is a factor to weigh against getting accommodations as there may be many reasons that prevent disclosure, such as fear of losing one’s job or fear of being estranged by one’s peers. Having accepted one’s disability as a part of one’s overall identity seems to indicate that one is familiar with it and knows which accommodations are appropriate to ask for, while demonstrating that one is not afraid or ashamed to ask for them.

**Conclusion**

When looking at teachers with disabilities, they appear to be at a crossroads. Firstly, as adults in an influential position in society, they are seen as being providers of knowledge and experience. They hold considerable influence, especially since there are not many teachers with disabilities (e.g., Brueggemann et al., 2005). Students with disabilities, as well as students without, may look up to teachers with disabilities and find their perceptions of what it is like to have a disability challenged. As adults, previous experiences in the education system may drive teachers with disabilities to change what they perceived to be ineffective practices when they were being educated. They may also be more aware of learning strategies that worked versus ones that did not, and may model many alternative ways of teaching and learning.
However, teachers with disabilities are adults with disabilities first. According to Gill (1997), people with disabilities, in order to feel integrated and to accept themselves as having a disability, must undergo several identity transformation stages, which ultimately cause one to step away from mainstream society and return to it with the hope of improving it (while also realizing that disability is a social construction).

As Ostrander (2008) indicates, even if we are adults with disabilities, we have many other identity markers we may need to address, such as our religious and spiritual beliefs, sexuality, and race. Consolidating one’s disability identity, or even one’s identity in general, is a very complex process and, as Erikson (1968) argued, it is always ongoing, so perhaps we pass through Gill’s stages again and again, depending on where we are in our lives. Test et al.’s (2005) foundational model for encouraging students with disabilities to self-advocate attempts to demonstrate how agency plays a role: we do not need to progress through a series of stages, rather we can work on each area that Test et al. outlines (knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership), as well as self-advocate after having built a foundation from knowing one’s self and one’s rights.

The literature about teachers with disabilities demonstrates that if you know one teacher with a disability, you know only one teacher with a disability, meaning that it is difficult to generalize across this unique population. What is interesting to me is how they express their understandings of identity to their students, and their perceptions of why and how they do this. Some teachers find their disability to be irrelevant to their teaching, while others seek to help those like themselves “beat the odds.” Ferri et al. (2005) highlight many discourses that influence teachers with disabilities in their everyday teaching practice: while the media and medical authorities provide, perhaps, a distorted view of what having a disability is like, their students also, if unexpectedly, contribute to their understanding of what it means to have a disability.

As discussed previously, one’s identity is formed based on the social experiences one
has. Individuals with disabilities face unique challenges with coming to terms with having a
disability, especially in the face of negative and conflicting attitudes of others in society. I have
not seen any other study that has sought to examine the identity of someone with a disability
through the lenses of both disability identity integration and self-advocacy. The objective of such
an inquiry is to explore how one’s perception of disability can influence not only self-concept but
also how one teaches his or her students as a teacher with a disability. In the interview questions I
asked, I was inspired by the questions posed in the review of the literature and wanted to find a
single thread that would bring everything together: the accumulated life experience of an
individual with a disability who, at some point, became a teacher—but was not always a teacher.
Chapter 3

Method

The purpose of the study was to provide a descriptive account of the experiences of two teachers with disabilities in order to report how disability influenced them both personally and professionally. I addressed five areas of interest. Firstly, how did the participants understand themselves as adults, as adults with disabilities, and as adults with disabilities who are teachers? Secondly, how did disability contribute to their pedagogy and how do their experiences as educators contribute to their understanding of disability? Thirdly, for these teachers with disabilities, what was the nature of the relationships in both educational and workplace contexts? Fourthly, what was their perspective on accommodations? Finally, what advice did they have for me as an aspiring teacher with a disability? My main objective was to gain a sense of the participants’ disability identity and to understand how they navigated some of the challenges identified in the literature.

In the following sections, I provide descriptions of how data collection and analysis were done for this study.

Data Collection

I chose interviewing as my method of inquiry, as I felt that surveys or focus groups would provide less specific information about participants. Face-to-face contact was preferred with participants as I could prompt them for more detail when needed and watch them consider the responses to my questions. As an individual with hearing loss, I prefer one-on-one contact since I can give the individual I am speaking with my undivided attention.

Morgan (1996) states that when considering whether to do an interview or a focus group, multiple factors should be examined. These include the location of the interviews, the mobility of
participants, scheduling, topic, one’s relationship to participants, the composition of participants, and the general context of the interview (p. 138). As I was asking participants personal questions about the formations of their identities, I wanted to ensure that they were in an environment where they would be able to express their complex thoughts and not worry about being interrupted or judged by other participants or myself.

Morgan and Spanish (1984) indicate that two weaknesses of focus groups are that they take place in an unnatural setting and that the researcher has a relative lack of control over what happens during the focus group (p. 262). Due to teachers with disabilities being a specialized population, choosing interviews allowed me to meet with participants at a time and location that was convenient for each individual. Furthermore, because of my hearing loss and vision challenges, I did not want to take the chance that participants in a focus group could do something so as to compromise the study and that I would not notice it happening.

I planned to interview four teachers with disabilities in the central and eastern Ontario area, but this number was reduced to two because I collected a great amount of data from my first two participants. The criteria for inclusion in the study were that the participant identify himself or herself as having a physical or mental disability and the individual must have taught for at least three years. The objective of these criteria was to ensure some experience with the disability and with teaching practice.

After gaining ethical approval from school boards, I drafted a letter that invited teachers with disabilities to participate in my study or to contact me for information (see Appendix A). To the participants, I explicitly stated that participation was voluntary and that their insights and experiences would be very much appreciated.

I was fortunate to already have some contacts that I could use before I started my study, so I used convenience sampling to find participants. I was in contact with the first participant due to my interest in volunteering at her satellite school, and my supervisor
recommended my second participant. If I needed more participants, I would have used referrals and posted a notice on the school board’s list-serve. I am grateful that, despite my population of interest being a marginalized and specialized one, I was able to find enough participants to complete the study.

After contacting the two participants, I arranged a time and a place that was convenient for each of them for our first interview. When each arrived, I introduced my intervenor/transcriber and myself. I then provided them with a letter of information and a consent form (see Appendix B), and ensured that they understood the process.

One semi-structured interview of about 90 minutes was conducted with each participant. All interviews (both these and the follow-up interviews) were digitally recorded, and the recording was transcribed verbatim by my intervenor. After my intervenor was finished transcribing, I reviewed the transcription and checked it for accuracy. Afterwards, each participant was given an opportunity to review a summary of her transcript or the transcript itself at a short follow-up interview of about 30 minutes. This interview was also transcribed, and a summary or the transcript was provided for feedback. The repeated transcriptions and checking with my intervenor and participants enabled me to clarify details about which I was unsure following transcription, thereby enhancing trustworthiness in the data and allowing my participants to qualify or clarify as needed. Both participants chose to review their own transcripts. I let both participants know that they could correct or omit aspects of the interview to their satisfaction, and both requested minor changes to the first interview’s transcript, which I made to their approval.

During the interview, I used a conversational style to elicit more data from the participants. I had a list of guiding questions, but attempted to create a natural and comfortable flow to the conversation by using active listening and my curiosity to ensure
the participants expanded on their initial answers. Not all questions were asked in the interest of time: I had five main sections I wanted to include. Refer to Appendix C for the interview schedule.

**Data Analysis**

Due to my hearing loss, I relied on my intervenor to transcribe each interview verbatim immediately after it had been completed (see Appendix D for confidentiality form). This way, confusion and limited recall about what was said and how it was said were avoided.

After using the program NVivo 10 in my qualitative research methods class, I discovered the ease of making and keeping track of codes, themes, and patterns with this program, especially considering my vision challenges. For both participants, I devised a list of codes (succinct and personal summations of segments of text) as I read (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 370), based on what seemed important in the transcript and what was important in my literature review, and then clustered them into categories. I also reviewed my codes and categories with my supervisor for confirmation that they were appropriate. I used the method of constant comparison in order to ensure that my codes and categories were helpful and informative. Further analysis enabled me to cluster categories to develop themes within each data set (McMillan & Schumacher, p. 376). Following the emergence of themes for each participant, I engaged in cross-case analysis to see if there was any overlap across participants. It was in this way that I hoped to bring out the individuality of each participant without overlooking any strong similarities.

Please see Table 1 for more information about the various categories and themes that were used in analyzing the data.
Table 1. Categories and Themes

The data were broken down into the following categories and themes:

Disability Identity

Awareness of her disability

Definition of disability (general and specific)

Multiple disabilities (specific to Abby)

Acceptance

Disability kinship (relationships with others with disabilities)

Self-Advocacy

Agency

Disclosure

Accommodations in the workplace

Teaching Strategies (varied depending on teacher)

Advice to Others (specifically asked to Abby)

Advice to Me

Despite my insider status to this population as a novice teacher with a disability, I ensured that it was their voices that came out in the following chapter, not mine. I was able to do this by taking my time to understand what my participants were truly saying, and took opportunities to double-check their meanings. Laurie, Abby, and myself are very different people and I hope our stories come out as such.

Limitations of the Study

No research endeavour is perfect. That being said, there were areas in my study that I was unable to address with the current methodology and resources. For example, I
recruited teachers who already saw themselves as individuals with disabilities to some extent. My participants are also very successful at their jobs: could others who are not as successful provide more information? Teachers who hide their disability or do not accept their disability may have provided interesting information. I have chosen to include a wide range of disabilities in my research as I believe that, in a typical work setting, one would rarely find many others with the same kind of disability; however, this may have prevented me from attaining knowledge about perceptions related to specific disabilities. Because this was an exploratory study, in some regards, questions I asked about accommodations and workplace interactions may warrant further and more specific analysis.

I also believe that, with more participants, I would have learned more about the nature of disability identity, and I hope to continue learning more from individuals with disabilities as I continue my research.

I hope that this study will encourage others to explore this area of research.
Chapter 4

Findings: Two Teachers with Disabilities

In this chapter, I report on the data collected from the two interviews conducted with each of the participants. For each participant, I begin with a short, biographical sketch that provides insight into the participant’s unique life circumstances. This introduction is followed by the themes within the data which can be reviewed (see Table 1 in the previous chapter). For both participants, the themes were generally the same: I added the theme of “Advice to Others” to Abby’s section as that was relevant in her case. In addition, as Abby had two disabilities, the experience of having two disabilities at the same time was examined in Abby’s case (For ease of reading, both disabilities, unless specifically mentioned, can be seen as one overall disability). Finally, Laurie provided more specific teaching strategies that I wanted to present in this thesis as well.

Please note that pseudonyms were used for all names and places so as to protect participants’ and others’ confidentiality.

**Laurie**

**Introduction to Laurie**

Upon meeting Laurie for the first time about one year ago, when I was interested in volunteering at her satellite school, it was evident that she shared my desire to speak to someone else with a disability. Her earnestness and her willingness to discuss her very practical teaching methods made her an asset for this study, and I was fortunate to have her participate.

Laurie has been an intermediate/senior teacher specializing in English and the Social Sciences for approximately 28 years. She has mostly taught Grades 9 to 12. For the majority of her teaching career, she has worked in three high schools for her current school board. Six years ago, she transferred to a small satellite school, StudentHelp, which specializes in providing an
alternative to students who may not find a good fit in a regular high school.

Laurie has a “cookie bite” hearing loss, meaning that she cannot hear mid-frequency sounds. This hearing loss was caused by the firing of an air rifle close to her ear when she was around 12 years of age. It was undiagnosed until she was in her early 40s.

As her main accommodation, Laurie selectively uses a hearing aid throughout the day. For example, when interacting with others, she prefers to have her hearing aid; but, when at home, or when working alone, she enjoys the quieter, less harsh sound that she hears without her hearing aid.

Disability Identity

In order to present the data in a way that would be easy to understand, I used themes from the disability identity literature, especially Gill’s (1997) model of disability identity integration. In the next chapter, I discuss whether Laurie appears to follow the linear ‘stages’ of development for disability identity integration.

Awareness of her disability: “Because why didn’t my parents figure it out? Why didn’t a teacher ever say, ‘Do you think you might have hearing loss?’” It is interesting to note that nothing out of the ordinary was happening when Laurie had her hearing tested in her early 40s. However, the results of this hearing test would change her life dramatically. When she told her parents of her acquired hearing loss, her father was quick to attribute the cause to the incident approximately 30 years ago where a boy fired an air rifle close to her ear, causing ringing in her ears for some days afterward. Her parents also realized that, with hearing aids, it would mean “at the end of [her] day [she wouldn’t] be so exhausted” and that she had been “overcompensating big time for [her] hearing loss.”

Addressing Laurie’s question above of why it took so long to diagnose her hearing loss, perhaps the answer is that no one influential in Laurie’s upbringing knew what the signs or symptoms of hearing loss were.
In school, Laurie was often said to not be paying attention, to be lazy, and not listening, and she also struggled with feeling lost on a regular basis. She would not consider herself a good high school student and describes her schooling experience as being very negative. She often felt negatively judged by peers and teachers.

That went on a report card. “Does not pay attention.” And I could not do math in a classroom. I can still see where I sat in my Grade 10 math class and I can still feel that feeling of absolutely being lost and not like… I missed, I missed something. I don’t know what the teacher’s talking about. So, she would get so far into the class and I’m going, “What did she just do?” […] So within two weeks of starting a math course, and I always started with good resolve, I was going to work harder and I was going to pay more attention, within two weeks I was already lost.

Laurie theorized that her lack of success in math class was not because she did not pay enough attention but because she was unable to hear the instructor when he/she turned towards the blackboard, and would therefore not understand what was happening. She was successful in English class only because she found that her writing skills did not depend on how much she could hear and that she was often put in charge of group work, so she could do most of the talking.

However, for Laurie, group work and group assignments (in other classes) were often problematic. Laurie stated that during these times, she “would miss things that were being said [and] if you ask people to repeat things too many times, they get very impatient.” Judgmental statements and questions such as “You’re not listening,” and “Why aren’t you joining in?” were commonplace and made Laurie feel as if she was lazy and not paying attention, despite expending her energy to be part of the conversation. Laurie explained that, to the present day, she has trouble following conversations in large groups, as she can only get pieces or snippets of the conversation, and those pieces and snippets need to be interpreted and comprehended, meaning
that Laurie is often behind in terms of where the conversation is going. As a result, for the group conversations at school, she never truly felt as if she was a part of the conversation or a part of the group—in both academic and social contexts. She stated that “if [she] had known at that time that [she] had hearing loss, that issue could probably have been addressed.”

Laurie stated that identification of hearing loss was not a topic discussed at her Faculty of Education or in professional development sessions. Laurie indicates that “if teachers knew that … there were things that they could look for” and that hearing loss could be easily recognized, perhaps they would be better able to advocate for students seen to potentially have hearing loss. No one provided Laurie with feedback about her hearing until her early 40s—no one noticed that she thought other people were mumbling when they were not, or that she had the television volume higher than usual. She stated that she wished she had found out about her hearing loss sooner because “It would have made life a lot less stressful.”

**Definition of disability (specific and general):** “Where if you look at ability, you’re looking at what a person can do, not what they can’t do.” After Laurie learned that she had hearing loss, she started reading about it to try and understand it. She was able to give me the definition of her disability used above in her introduction section and to indicate what she could and could not hear. What she discovered, however, was that her readings could tell her “the general principles of what is helpful for hearing loss but [they did not] tell you in your environment how it’s going to work or not work.”

Laurie indicated that hearing is a big part of a teacher’s day and because listening is such an important activity, Laurie has been forced “to design situations where listening can happen effectively.” For example, if an environment is too noisy, everyone is talking, and Laurie wants to speak to a particular student, she may ask that student to move out into the hallway where it is quieter. Laurie stated, talking about the importance of first-hand experience:

You know what’s interesting? I’ve, I’ve read, um, as much as I could get my hands on
about hearing loss, but I think until you’ve actually experienced hearing loss, you don’t really understand it. … anything I read didn’t, it, it talked in general terms, so you still have to figure out your understanding of hearing loss based on the environment that you’re in and how you’re going to maneuver within that environment.

An example that Laurie used is that the hearing loss literature might tell you to reduce the echo in a room, but, ultimately, whether one can actually reduce the echo is dependent on many factors, such as one’s ability to place materials to absorb sound in that room. Her favourite restaurant has two sides: one with ceramic floors and regular tables and the other with tablecloths and carpeting. A combination of knowledge gained from reading information and the experience of putting it into practice has led Laurie to “always choose the side with the carpeting and the tablecloths.”

Laurie indicated the importance of identifying specific disabilities rather than saying that someone has a disability in general: “I think by identifying what the disability is, means that you’ve got something to work with.” She used the example of Individual Education Plans for students with disabilities, which help identify what the students’ weaknesses are. Faced with the weaknesses, one is able to ask, “what is the strategy I have to use now?”

Speaking of disability and empowerment, Laurie stated, “Do the words disability and empowerment go together? I guess in a way they do because if you have a disability, you know you need to find ways to be empowered and maybe that makes you more effective.”

When asked about what disability in general meant to her, she discussed the importance of “seeing the ability, not the disability.” She stated that, “disability means what you’re dis-abled to do” and that “in many ways it puts the onus on the other person to judge that you’re not able to do something.” However, “if you look at ability, you’re looking at what a person can do, not what they can’t do.” Laurie believed that indiscriminate use of the word disability can hinder people and that potentially we are all disabled in some way.

Taking another approach to outlining what disability meant to her, Laurie indicated that
disability meant “that there are some things you don’t do the same way as someone else” and that “your ability becomes strategizing and problem-solving and all those things we have to do anyways.” She stated:

To be good, you can’t just do it the way you think, well maybe the way you’ve been taught or maybe the way you think it should be done. You’ve got to have the feedback to say, “This isn’t working. What do I do next?”

An example that is discussed in more detail in the teaching strategies section is Laurie’s ability to strategize in order to supervise group work or to mark oral presentations. Even if she cannot hear all that is said (the usual way of doing things), her attention to specific details (i.e., body language, preparation notes) yields her practical results she can use to inform her students’ learning and her own teaching, much in the same way other teachers would use what they hear from their students as feedback.

Acceptance: “Maybe I don’t want to hear it all.” When asked about how she felt about her disability, Laurie pointed out that this question was complicated to answer “because in different situations [her disability] brings up different feelings.” For example, Laurie’s experience with teenagers (as both teacher and parent) has taught her that teenagers do not want to repeat themselves. “They said it once, and even though they know you didn’t hear it, they’re not going to repeat it.” When failing to understand information that will go unrepeated, Laurie said that she feels badly with the realization that she is “never going to hear it again.” In addition, Laurie notices that teenagers mumble a lot: “I think that’s part of adolescence too. They’re not confident, they’re not sure they’re saying the right thing.”

Laurie admitted that her hearing loss gave rise to uncertainty, especially about what others were saying or how they were saying it. She mentioned that she became very annoyed with her husband when he mumbled, but then questioned herself: “And, of course, [she laughs] is he really mumbling? I hear mumbling.” At home, Laurie often does not wear her hearing aid, so she
cannot be certain if her husband is mumbling. “I’m sure he gets annoyed with me too, but, right, there’s a frustration level because, uh, I can’t hear.”

There were times, Laurie indicated, when she wished that she did not have a hearing loss as she believed that it interfered with effective communication. However, she does not know what not having a hearing loss would be like—what would be the trade-off, she asked. She credits her hearing loss with making her “more sensitive to students and their differences” and states that, “I have learned how to work around the differences and so maybe that’s made me a better teacher.”

She summarized her ideas as follows:

Maybe I don’t want to hear it all. [Laughs] Right? And, and maybe, just maybe I like being that person who gets the fact that I’m not perfect and that I have to work with that limitation because there’s that side of it too. It’s about, I, I see kids every day. Do they like their life? No. Can they change it? No. You, you have to work with what you have and I guess what I’ve learned is that […] I guess there’s moments that I would love to trade it, but, on the whole, I think I’ve learned so much through the hearing loss that I wouldn’t have known otherwise.

Disability kinship (relationships with others with disabilities): “Because I don’t know that I’ve ever looked at my hearing loss history in one sitting to, you know, kind of put parameters around it and see…” Laurie and I determined that her husband’s father was the first influential person with a hearing loss she got to know. He was a minister, and talking was very important in his family: “you can’t be in the room with them for five seconds before they’re all talking at once.” His hearing loss was much more significant than Laurie’s and, because this was some years ago, technology was not as good as it is now. He used three different types of hearing aids: one was bone conduction, and “he wore one that I think hooked over his ear and then he had a wire that came down and he had this battery pack. Well, I’m sure nobody wears that kind of hearing aid anymore.” If he had his hearing aids off, he did not hear much of anything.
Despite the fact that he died before Laurie found out about her hearing loss, she “certainly learned a lot from the way he coped.”

Laurie also noted how others in her husband’s family dealt with her father-in-law’s hearing loss. “Hearing it from the other family members, they were often very frustrated by the, uh, lack of ability to hear.” Laurie, in particular, observed her mother-in-law’s behaviour around the minister:

She learned to speak more clearly and more loudly, but it was a big effort on her part because you’ve constantly got to be mindful and, then, when you’re with other people, then you’ve got to pull back and tone down. And that was another adjustment that I found I had to do as well.

When asked if her disability impacted her relationships with others with disabilities, Laurie said that she thought “it made [her] more sensitive to other people’s disability” and that she goes out of her way “when somebody has a disability to include them because I think sometimes the disability is, it excludes people in certain ways.” She was not sure if it was her newfound hearing loss or if it was just the way she was raised, to be tolerant of difference and to be aware of others and their needs that caused these behaviours. However, she indicated that her goal when working with others with disabilities is to not to make the situation awkward or uncomfortable for them.

Laurie has found that her disability has influenced how she works with students with disabilities. She indicated that with students with hearing loss, she could gain their attention and respect by indicating that she was undergoing similar experiences to them. For example, she:

had one boy with hearing loss that used to try and say things to me as he was walking away. “Come on. Like you know… If I were walking away from you saying things, you wouldn’t hear me. So don’t pull that trick on me.” Right? So, so you, and they’ll listen to you because they know now they can’t get away with anything.
She then stated that having a disability not only makes you more aware but also more considerate of what others are going through. Again, returning to that student with a hearing loss, Laurie’s goal would be “to create the environment for that student that is more conducive to helping them hear.”

The same considerations held for students with other kinds of disabilities, Laurie indicated. “You say, ‘Yeah, I get it. You know, that, um, you struggle with learning something in that manner or doing that type of presentation, so let’s brainstorm and let’s find something that’s going to work for you.’” Laurie indicated that she is more willing to listen to what a student has to say about needing accommodations and that she will not try to force them “to do what I expect every other student is going to be able to do.”

Laurie indicated that many of the students that she works with have some sort of disability. She often tells them that, “Your life is your life,” and that “we might wish [our lives] to be something different, but that might never be the reality, so we have to accept, we have to work with what we have.” She indicated that knowing that you can only work with what you have is freeing, as it essentially leads to saying: “This is who I am. Now take me the way I am; and when it’s not working, then we [find a way to make it] work.” She indicated that this ‘give-and–take’ dynamic exists in any relationship and that open communication is extremely important.

The last aspect of Laurie’s disability kinship that I could ascertain in such a short time was the rapport that we developed over the course of the two interviews. Because of my profound hearing loss, I found myself able to relate to many things that Laurie was saying, and found we shared many frustrations and challenges as well. I believe the reverse held true for her as well, and she commented on the research process:

It’s been an interesting learning experience for me. I always say in teaching, there’s so little time to reflect and we need more of that. So, in a way, the interview has helped me to reflect more on my hearing loss and the strategies that I do use. So they’re more
immediate and at the front of my brain, which means then I’m probably more aware then in situations where the communication isn’t as effective and that I still have some work to do because it’s, you know, it’s something that’s been brought forward now and consolidated. Because I don’t know that I’ve ever looked at my hearing loss history in one sitting to, you know, kind of put parameters around it and see…”

Throughout the interview, as evidenced in several quotes above, Laurie asked for confirmation often, to ensure that I understood what she was talking about or to learn that, perhaps, I had gone through a similar experience to her. During the second interview and afterwards, she took many opportunities to ask how my research was progressing and provided useful suggestions for further research opportunities. As part of the interview questions, I asked her to give me some advice and, in so doing, she showed that she genuinely cared about my success as a teacher. I end the discussion of Laurie’s data by reporting her advice to me.

Self-Advocacy

The purpose of this section is to present the data that involves Laurie taking actions towards improving communication or otherwise ensuring that she is able to understand the information she is receiving from others. In the following chapter, I discuss how consistent Laurie’s self-advocacy is with the literature.

Agency: “I do sometimes, but I don’t other times. I sort of mix it up.” By agency, I mean to refer to ‘choice’ and ‘control.’ Upon interviewing Laurie, I got the sense that her choice to wear or not wear her hearing aid was important to her, as both afforded different positives and negatives. For example, when having the hearing aid in, she is better able to understand others; yet the constant need to interpret every sound that occurs is tiring. If she requires focus or wants to relax, she takes her hearing aid out. This is important to note because it is completely up to her to make the decision of how she deals with the outside world. It is interesting to note that Laurie even chooses whether or not to wear her hearing aid when practicing with and performing the
fiddle. Laurie stated that her disability has taught her that “preferences are okay.”

It could be argued that Laurie found her way to a preferred teaching position at StudentHelp, the small satellite school she has worked at for six years now. She indicated that there were a variety of factors that led her to make a request to work at StudentHelp and transfer from her third high school: she had been moved from classroom to classroom too much; she had been given a variety of courses to teach with a lot of content to learn; and she wanted to work with “hard-to-serve kids,” as she had experienced successes working with these kinds of students in the past. Laurie advocated that, although her disability was not the most important consideration (or even a conscious consideration) for her to want this position, she still thought that StudentHelp would be a good fit for her and, “taken in combination with all the change that [she’d] been through, this seemed to be a better structure [and] a better fit for what [she] needed.” When she arrived at StudentHelp, she “realized that it was easier having a one-on-one conversation with kids than it was sometimes in a classroom.” She mostly works one-on-one with students, aside from small literacy classes that usually have ten students in them.

It was previously reported that math class in high school was problematic for Laurie because of the way information was presented. In high school, even without knowledge of her disability at the time, Laurie recognized that she had, in her own words, “to be resourceful and because I was struggling so with classroom math, I did correspondence math. And I got what I needed. And I did very well.” This experience is similar to Laurie’s determination to get great marks at the end of her high school career so as to get into university and, after her accounting work experience, when she discovered she did not want to be working in the same cubicle for the rest of her life, to do well in the education program and become a teacher. She stated that her “academic success came when I started doing strategizing. I had to maybe do things differently.”

After recognizing her disability, Laurie did not lose sight of her ability to plan and strategize:
It’s a disability. Part of it is knowing how to control it and I think for every person it must be somewhat different. But over time, I’ve, I’ve kind of figured out some things that work and some things that don’t.

Even before she knew of her disability, she was able to determine what worked for her (math by correspondence, teaching as a career) versus what did not (math in the classroom, accounting).

**Disclosure:** “So, in some ways, it’s taken time to learn to advocate and to say ‘I, I need you facing me.’” Laurie indicated that she found out about her hearing loss about ten years ago, but it was only two years ago that she started telling both students and staff about her hearing loss. She stated that when she first started telling others, she selectively told “Some students. Some staff. [she laughs] Not all students. Not all staff.” In this way, she felt that these students and staff would share the information with others, perhaps saving her some effort. She has started disclosing her disability to administrators in the last year.

She was initially anxious about what student reactions would be:

I think it’s only really been recent that I’ve felt comfortable enough talking to my students about not being able to hear. And at first I thought, “Oh, oh, they’re, they’re going to judge me and they’re going to try and, you know, get away with things.” But what I found happened was I could say to them when they’re walking away from me: “You’re walking away from me. I can’t read your lips. I have no clue what you’re saying.” So now, it’s actually an invitation for them that if there is something important they need me to hear, they’ve got to stop and turn around and face me and say what they’re going to say.

Laurie stated that, if she was without a disability, she doubted that her teenagers would listen to her make similar requests as they would want to oppose authority. However, because she is upfront about her disability, and asking for a simple accommodation, it is not a challenge to them. She is providing “an invitation now to meet me where I’m at,” or, in other words, “it’s human
being to human being as opposed to the teacher telling the student what they should be doing.”

With staff, Laurie indicated that those she had been working with for a long time were mindful of what she needed, and that she also felt comfortable standing up for herself with these individuals and indicating whenever she needed something. With newer contacts, or at professional development sessions and meetings, it is a little harder.

**Accommodations in the workplace: “And so then it becomes the trial and error.”**

Laurie and I acknowledged that a challenge with asking for accommodations is doing it strategically: firstly, you need to know what to ask for and, secondly, how to ask for it. For example, Laurie spent some time talking with me about her anxiety regarding attending professional development sessions and meetings, and asking for accommodations amidst a group of strangers. She expressed that she feared others judging her or thinking that she was stupid. In her own words, she explains this anxiety.

I’m supposed to be paying attention to what’s happening. If I’m not comfortable telling people that I need to be able to hear and you need to do things in such-and-such a way, um, and I’m lost, then I, I start to feel really stupid, right? Because I’m missing stuff and, and people don’t, don’t think to correct for that. I’ve, I’ve tried several different strategies. I used to go in and I used to tell the presenter “I won’t hear you if you’re facing away from me. I need to sit in a place where I have the best advantage for hearing what you’re saying.” And that only works to a certain point because they remember for the first little bit and then they forget. […] It takes a lot of courage if you’re with a group of professional people you don’t know, it takes a lot of courage to say, and because, you know, because nobody sees my hearing aids, so people don’t have to know, but it takes a lot of courage to say to somebody in a big group setting, “If you turn away, I won’t hear you. If you are all talking at once, I won’t hear you.”

In other words, asking for accommodations is stressful for Laurie because, on one hand, if she
does not ask for accommodations, she will not get them, and will therefore miss out on information and may be judged if the missed information is found out at a later time—or, more importantly, if she does not ask for accommodations, she is not getting anything for her time. On the other hand, if she does ask for accommodations, what guarantee is there that those accommodations will be given? I particularly appreciate the ending of the quotation above as she goes into the “little things” that could cause her to miss information: everything from others needing to face her and needing to talk one at a time to the many other concerns that Laurie may not feel comfortable addressing, perhaps due to how many concerns there are, or perhaps out of politeness and tact.

We discussed other kinds of accommodations that Laurie could have implemented at her workplace, such as the use of an FM system. Laurie indicated that she only knew of the FM system being used by students and not teachers and asked how one could implement such a device to help the teacher. I indicated that the FM could be placed in a central location or, more expensively, every student could get a transmitter (or be trusted to pass transmitters along). Laurie has yet to try something like this, and this may have to do with the fact that she only disclosed her disability to administrators in the last year. Due to Laurie’s belief that it is in the experimentation and practice that one finds out whether or not accommodations are ultimately useful, future discussions about and practice with other kinds of accommodations that might be useful could prove helpful in Laurie’s case.

**Teaching Strategies**

This section is closely related to the previous section on ‘agency’ insofar as it demonstrates control over one’s ability to teach regardless of one’s disability. However, due to the practicality of several of the teaching methods described, I wanted to ensure a section was provided for these teaching methods

**Strategies Laurie told me.** I initially asked Laurie if, due to her hearing loss, there were
any aspects of teaching she dreaded or tried to avoid. I was thinking that perhaps she would want
to avoid oral presentations and group assignments, for example. However, she outlined several,
very useful strategies for how to execute those aspects of the curriculum well rather than trying to
avoid them. For example, with oral presentations, even if one cannot hear all aspects of the
presentation, one can use student feedback, visual aspects, body language, and preparation notes
to provide detailed feedback about the presentation. With group assignments, one can monitor the
students’ body language, their ability to work together, and whether they get the work done to
evaluate group cohesiveness.

One-way communication vs. two-way communication. Laurie traced her development
from a one-way communicator to a two-way communicator by first highlighting a turning point
that she had in a noisy classroom while teaching at her third high school. Regardless of where she
was placed, she continuously heard a specific student talking and, because she did not hear other
students, determined that this particular student was not paying attention. She scolded this
student, and it was only after she learned about her disability that she realized that because of the
acoustics of the room, and where she and the student were positioned, her hearing impairment
made her more likely to hear that student above all other students. Now her philosophy is to give
students a chance to explain where they are coming from or what their experience is before
immediately judging them.

Advice to Me, as a Beginning Teacher with a Disability

Laurie advised that students generally want to learn and, if I give them the benefit of the
doubt and keep the communication lines open, I will have a better time with them. She warned
me to avoid having the situation she had with her only focusing on the student she could hear who
was just one of several who were speaking out of turn, and advised me to always be aware that
there were two sides to a story and to show that I was there for my students.
Abby

Introduction to Abby

Ever since my supervisor told me about Abby, I knew that I wanted her to participate in my study. When I first met her, while attempting to combat my nerves about the interview process, I was immediately impressed by her friendliness and outgoing nature. Abby’s interest in my project and her contributions proved invaluable.

Abby has been a primary/junior/intermediate teacher for 16 years. Her teaching has focused in the area of special education. In her second and third years, she taught at a demonstration school for young students with learning disabilities called Transitions. Since then, at the school board where this study was conducted, she has been teaching at a district learning disabilities support program which offers intensive literacy intervention to students with learning disabilities.

Abby has two disabilities. Abby has very mild cerebral palsy and a non-verbal learning disability. While her cerebral palsy was identified close to birth, Abby found out about her learning disability in her third year of university, when she was 21. The learning disability impacts her ability to process large amounts of information (i.e., synthesizing, thinking, and then writing about the information). It has been a long time since she has been assessed, so terminology and assessment may have changed since then.

Abby does not make use of any major accommodations in her workplace.

Disability Identity

The same themes and categories have been used to report Abby’s data as were used to report data for Laurie. In this section, information about how Abby came to perceive herself as an individual with multiple disabilities is also reported.

Awareness of her disability: “I thought learning disabilities were just the latest bandwagon.” For Abby, her cerebral palsy “was always a known fact.” She was approximately a year
old when it was discovered that she was not meeting mobility-related benchmarks. She expressed that she did not “have a lot of clinical information about what cerebral palsy was” and knew in simple terms “that the messages that were happening in my brain weren’t clear to other parts of my body” and that the signals were “sort of mixed.” Abby states that her relationship with her parents was very open, and “they probably shared their understanding of what cerebral palsy was and that became my understanding of what cerebral palsy was.”

Ever since her teen years, Abby has recognized the importance of exercise for coping with her cerebral palsy:

And I have to say, while I’m talking about the physical component, because of my cerebral palsy I really do try to stay fit and I do try to, um, I just think it’s to my benefit in terms of the nature of my disability to be as fit as I, I can just because of the spasticity of my muscles and that sort of thing. So I do try to maintain a certain level of fitness.

She likes rock climbing, hiking, and running, and tries to get to the mountains whenever she can. She has a large number of achievements under her belt, including climbing one of the highest mountains in Europe. Recently, she has worked with a personal trainer who has done a lot of research on cerebral palsy. This physical trainer works from a fitness model and not a physiotherapy or medical model, and Abby has learned a great deal from her about what kinds of exercises are beneficial.

Abby was on an accessibility task force in her third year of university when she first became aware of learning disabilities. She initially thought that someone had made up the phrase, but saw a list of approximately eighteen characteristics of learning disabilities and “circled nine that matched [her] understanding of [herself].” She then went to a psychiatrist, did testing and “determined that yes, in fact [she] had a learning disability.”

Prior to having the learning disability identified, Abby was having a hard time with her university courses. She discovered that she was not keeping up with the class work, “It was too
much volume to manage and do successfully.” She would drop courses before the final exams and took summer classes to make them up. She stated that as an English and History major, she was taking “heavy reading and writing courses” and that perhaps it may have been better if, instead of the standard methods of assessment for these courses, she had:

been able to just talk to somebody about my ideas with regard to what I was reading as [opposed] to taking all the time that it took to write my ideas down. So maybe with the methods of assessment being essay writing, a different option may have been [just as viable].

However, as Abby went to university at a time when her housemates were cutting-edge for having personal computing devices at home, she recognizes that there was no adaptive technology in the sense that we understand it today. Abby also pointed out that there may have been just 350 students with disabilities at her university when she went, and now there are many more students with disabilities.

It is not surprising, then, that Abby had challenges through her public schooling years. Her marks were Cs and Bs, and they only improved when Abby “determined that [she] wanted to go to university so [she] needed the grades to get in.” She remembered that, in Grade 9, she “sat down to write [her] first set of exams”:

And I realized that I knew the answers, I remember distinctly sitting in front of my paper and knowing the answers, having read the paper, but the time was over. And, uh, so I didn’t finish the exam. So I was really fortunate in that we had a neighbour who was a guidance counsellor. He also had a daughter with a disability. And I went to him and I said, “Mark, I cannot finish an exam. I’m never going to pass high school. I’m going to fail in life because I can’t write an exam in the allotted amount of time.” And he said, “No, no, no. We can get extra time.” And we just assumed that it was because of my cerebral palsy being on my right side, hemiplegia on the right side, that maybe I wrote
slowly. And so I was, you know, that’s how I started getting extra time for exams. And that’s how, when I went to university, I said, “My history has been such that at high school I got time and a half for exams. I’ll require the same here.” And it was all based on physical disability and not an understanding of the fact that it was probably more LD [learning disability] related, but who knows?

Luckily, even without awareness of her learning disability, she was still able to get helpful accommodations. The above quotation indicates the helplessness, desperation and fear Abby must have been feeling when writing her Grade 9 exams, knowing that she knew the answers, yet could not communicate them in the time allotted and knowing that her inability to do so could compromise her education and future.

Around the same time she was identified with a learning disability, Abby met and befriended a graduate student who also had the same kind of learning disability. She taught Abby “all the strategies she used to be successful at university in English” and History. These approaches were very specific and strategic and Abby found her marks going “from sixties to getting a paper back and having, like, an A on it.” That was not all: there were more papers with As, and professors were telling her that her papers were giving them new ideas they had not thought about before. Abby also realized at this time she was smart and capable, but at what cost?

I just realized, you know what, maybe I could have gone into law. Maybe I [shouldn’t] just be a teacher. And there’s the ‘just a teacher’ factor. Um, maybe I should have done something different. I didn’t realize my own, I think, academic potential until [third year] so...

**Definition of disability (general and specific):** “I guess I would look at ability first and I would think, ‘Okay, disability means understanding and knowing yourself.’” Abby and I took some time during the interview to unpack what disability meant. She stressed that asking the question, “What does disability mean to you?” is different than “What does having a
disability mean to you?” She was also willing—thankfully—to answer both of these questions.

When attempting to define disability to a hypothetical student who asked her what the word meant, Abby said that she would “look at ability first and I would think, ‘Okay, disability means understanding and knowing yourself … and recognizing and capitalizing on your abilities while at the same time honouring the fact that you might have some limitations that other people might not have.’” Implicit in that answer is the idea that one will have to do some strategizing in order to overcome those limitations. Abby was quick to state that if one is not good at something or does not want to do something, this does not make it a disability—“a disability would mean, I guess, a cluster of difficulties that creates chronic problems and actually limits your success as compared to people without disabilities.”

Another implicit aspect of the definition is that there is a comparison taking place between those with disabilities and those without disabilities. This is how Abby arrived at disability being a social construction:

I think I’m disabled in the eyes of other people who maybe don’t have disability. And it’s a comparison, right? There are people with disabilities and there are people without disabilities.

Abby used herself as an example of how disability is socially constructed. She stated that “[she’s] always pushed [herself] beyond the limits of what [she] thought other people expected of a person with a disability” to the point where, when she pushes herself and does something incredible, she does not know if she’s acting of her own volition or is acting against others’ perceptions of what people with disabilities can and cannot do. Abby can point to a list of great achievements, including completing a Master’s degree, scaling a tall mountain, and finishing a 12 kilometre run. However, the question becomes one of motivation: when Abby sets out a goal, does she set it for her own intrinsic satisfaction, or does she complete the goal in order to prove to herself and others that she can succeed regardless of her disability? About these accomplishments, she stated:
I don’t know if that’s really who I am as a person or is it who I thought I should be according to what other people think? And I think I’m always really hard on myself and I have really high expectations of myself. … Those things are, I think they’re important to me as a person but they’re always, they’re also important to me in terms of my perception of who I am and who I am to other people and it’s always pushing beyond the limits of what I’m supposed to be able to do as a person with a disability.

Abby realizes that although this perspective has allowed her to achieve many great accomplishments, her attitude may “not necessarily [be] very accepting in some ways either.”

I asked Abby that, if she always felt that she pushed herself beyond the limits of what she thought other people expected of a person with a disability, then what did she think other people expect of individuals with disabilities? She indicated she had been thinking about this issue for some time and that it made her ask, “How much do I really think about what other people think?” She indicated that she pushes herself to feel good about herself when she achieves the goals she set out for herself, but, on the other hand, she realizes that she is the only person with a disability in her group of hikers, runners, bikers, or climbers, and this makes her wonder what they expect of her. She spoke of a time when she went climbing with a group of hard-core athletes who regularly go barreling down mountains on bikes, and it was hard for her, with these kinds of people, “not to always think, ‘Oh, you know, am I holding them back? What do they think?’”

There are also people who admire her “and think it’s incredible that you do these things even though you have CP because there are lots of people who don’t have disabilities who don’t do any of these things.” We discussed that sometimes it was hard to accept these statements as compliments and not as other people being condescending or patronizing: it can be hard to sort out the difference. Abby indicated that, in some ways, she really misses “that [she doesn’t] have a community of people around [her] who like to do the things I do who also have a disability.”

Abby also touched upon another aspect of how disability is a social construct when she
indicated that someone who is having trouble navigating their environment could be having
trouble because of this environment, not their abilities. As an example, Abby’s students are given
a wide variety of accommodations and modifications in her literacy intervention program, and are
able to improve their skills and find the confidence in themselves that they were lacking.

Abby noted that she finds “it easier to talk about ideas of accessibility and inclusiveness
rather than what disability means to [her].” This could potentially be due to having a career’s
worth of experience working with students with learning disabilities and ensuring that these
students are given the chance to have the same literacy skills as their non-disabled counterparts.

When speaking about what disability means to her, specifically, she stated:

I would say that having a disability means that there are things that I need to do
differently than other people do. And that I might need more time or I might make
different choices because of my ability levels in certain areas.

As an example, she counts herself fortunate to be teaching in the intensive literacy intervention
program, as she can focus her energy on subject-specific skills and not have to internalize and
master a wide range of content from a variety of subjects.

It is with some irony that I note that Abby needed to explain her non-verbal learning
disability to me. I initially came to the conclusion that she struggled with reading information.

She advised that it went beyond that: “It’s not the reading of [information] so much as being able
to organize ideas.” She explains her learning disability to her students in this way:

I think about the fact that a person with a non-verbal learning disability might have all the
pieces of a puzzle there, but they have difficulty putting [them] into a cohesive whole to
create a picture. … And that’s what essay writing was like for me. I think I had really
good ideas but I didn’t know how to structure them into a cohesive whole that made
sense and that said what I wanted to say.

With these detailed and insightful explanations of her learning disability and her willingness and
patience to explain it to me, I felt that she had a very accurate understanding of how her learning
disability impacted her. It should not come to a surprise, then, that she did her Master of
Education on learning disabilities.

**Multiple disabilities: “Sometimes it’s hard to tease out what’s specific to cerebral palsy and what’s specific to having a learning disability as well.”** Abby’s experience of getting exam accommodations for her cerebral palsy, which may have been more appropriate as accommodations then for her non-identified non-verbal learning disability, certainly demonstrate that, even though the two disabilities are vastly different, they can be hard to distinguish.

Nowadays, the main difficulty for Abby in terms of distinguishing her disabilities is figuring out which one caused the most fatigue during the day: “So I don’t know if sometimes I feel overwhelmed and tired because my brain is tired or because my muscles have been working against me and I’m just tired, physically tired.” On some days, the cause of fatigue is obvious, such as when Abby is having a ‘CP day,’ meaning that her muscles are working against her and movement is limited. When asked if she wanted to be less tired at the end of the day, Abby indicated that most of the time she sees herself as a pretty high energy person and stated that “I don’t know how realistic [not being tired] is when you’re 46 and you have two kids and you’re balancing a job and a life.” We shared a good laugh as I can relate: life presents many challenges, and not all are disability-related.

A difference between her two disabilities is that whereas her cerebral palsy is visually evident, her learning disability is invisible. This means that when it comes to disclosure, Abby is often at liberty to choose whether or not to disclose her learning disability. However, she does have to deal with reactions from others who may inquire if they notice her walking differently. Abby believes that her learning disability “has affected [her] life in more ways” because it has affected her vocational aspirations, especially with regards to professions that require processing and managing large volumes of information. She indicated that “in some ways [she wished] that
[she] didn’t have a learning disability more so than a physical disability” because she thought that if “things didn’t take as much processing time” then “[she] would probably have a different career or be doing something different such as being an administrator or a physiotherapist.

Acceptance: “Sometimes [my disability] affects my self-concept and sometimes it doesn’t.” When asked about how she felt about her disabilities, Abby stated that it depended on “how much time [she took] to think about them.” For example, sometimes she is very conscious of the way she walks, such as when she was a teenager and wanted to make an impression on boys:

I don’t want to walk like a duck and I don’t want to look different and I’m fortunate enough that my CP is mild enough that if I really concentrate and think to myself, “Heel, toe. Heel, toe.” I can walk really straight down the hall.

With regards to her learning disability, Abby stated that sometimes she would feel intimidated if she was in a room filled with intellectual people or if the topic of discussion was one that she did not know a lot about: “I’ll be quiet because I’ll feel that I will not have much to contribute to the conversation and if I try, my ideas won’t come out clearly.”

She stated that there were times where she wished she did not have a disability, but that other times, she would not want to get rid of her disability because she has “met incredible people and done some pretty amazing things regardless, and sometimes because of, having a disability.”

Abby counts herself fortunate to have a strong network of family and friends that, despite not having disabilities, are all very supportive of her. She stated that she and her husband divide tasks in the morning so that he focuses on getting the children ready for school, and she is then able to get herself ready for the day. When she is feeling down or not having the best day, she is able to get together with her friends—including a friend who lived with her during university—and do something active to feel better. She stated that because her friends have known her for a long time they have been able to see different aspects of who she is: not just someone with a
disability. Abby’s colleagues at school have also known her for a long time and interactions are always very positive. Abby shared that she thought her “disability doesn’t come up in a lot of situations at work because [she’s] been with the Board for a long time and I know a lot of people and they know me.”

Disability kinship (relationships with others with disabilities): “And it was so great to hang out with them every once in a while ‘cause … we could all just be ourselves and not have to explain anything about disability or what we needed to communicate or, we could just be.” In addition to the graduate student that helped Abby develop strategies for how she could manage her learning disability, Abby had many friends in university with disabilities. One of her best friends was Deaf and was one of the first successful Deaf Ph.D. candidates. Another Deaf friend was pursuing an MBA, while a third Deaf friend was becoming an occupational therapist. All three knew each other as they had attended the same school for the Deaf. Abby also had two other friends who were twins with vision impairments. When she told me about this group of friends, it was clear that she fondly recalled her experiences with them and was proud of all that they had achieved. She expressed that, with these people, she felt that she could just be herself and not have to struggle to communicate a concept that might not be understood by non-disabled people. Abby indicated that this group of people was very important to her because they demonstrated they could be successful and that they understood and accepted where she was coming from.

Abby expressed to me that she appreciated that I understood where she was coming from. She stated that she could talk to many people about disability, but a lot of the time she felt that they never really understood unless they had personal experience with disability. I immediately agreed with her and indicated that sometimes I felt strongly about, perhaps an accessibility issue, for instance, and I sometimes had trouble expressing to others how I felt and why I felt that way. She agreed and told me that when she was with her group of friends with disabilities at university,
she felt that she did not have to put forward so much effort to be understood.

Self-Advocacy

This section reports whether Abby is assertive with regards to getting what she needs or what would benefit her as being a teacher with multiple disabilities.

Agency: “[At 12 years old], that’s when, you know, as anybody does at that age, they start to look at, okay who am I and who do I want to present to the world?” Abby was clear that, with regard to seeking accommodations, she was the one responsible for herself. No one else would know how best to support her if she did not speak up or take action. She expressed that “one of the things that has happened in my life is that everything I’ve accomplished … and all the accommodations that I’ve used and found out about, I’ve done very much on my own.” For her schooling years, there was “almost zero to no intervention from [her] parents.” They provided lots of support but they did not know how to go about requesting and receiving accommodations for one’s disability (or disabilities). Abby’s story about asking for accommodations in Grade 9 is representative of the way that Abby sought solutions to her own problems, and, in the process, learned about how to manage life with her disabilities. She stated that, in Grade 9, she did not know who got accommodations and who did not—so she learned. Knowing the answers and not being able to write them down, she said, was a rather fearful experience; however, she has the assurance that, at even a young age, she found a solution to a potentially terrifying ordeal.

In addition to exam accommodations, Abby was concerned with her social status at her high school. When Abby was younger, she missed school due to surgery and her self-concept was poor. However, as her mobility improved, and she discovered the benefits of exercise, she began realizing that she had options—she could choose what to do and what not to do. She was, she said, like any other teenager, starting to define herself. She stated that her teenage years were about finding how much she would let her disability define who she was.

I really didn’t like myself probably from Grade 7 to … Grade 10. And so what I actually
Switching schools was Abby’s decision and was supported by her parents who knew that she was struggling in her old high school and who provided transportation to the new one. One of Abby’s main motivators for wanting to switch schools was that the same group of students knew her from an age when she did not have any control or agency over her identity, and she wanted to start again: “They just looked at me as the kid who was different, right?” she said, “Or the kid with the disability.” She was concerned with the questions, “Who am I and who do I want to present to the world?” She decided she wanted to go “and present [herself] in a new way to new people, and the results were very positive.” Abby did not think the school could have done a better job of accommodating her socially—she just wanted to start fresh and not let her disability define her.

**Disclosure:** “I just didn’t want [my disabilities] to be the first impression.” Abby stated that she would disclose her disabilities when it was appropriate to do so. She expressed to me on a number of occasions that she did not want her disabilities to define who she was or be the main characteristic that others noticed about her. When applying for jobs, she did not disclose her disability, unless it became relevant during the job interview—as it did, when she was asked if she had any experience with learning disabilities. In addition to having a learning disability, she also had experience working with students with learning disabilities and completed a Master’s of Education on the strategies students with learning disabilities require to have the same opportunities for success as other students. In social situations, if she notices people staring at her, she will disclose that she has cerebral palsy and has not been in a car accident: I initially thought that this was her joking and putting a positive spin on her cerebral palsy, but people have asked
her this question. When she pushes herself athletically with others, such as with a group of runners or climbers, for instance, she will let them know that she has cerebral palsy so they are not alarmed when she sometimes moves slower. It is Abby’s experience that many others are accommodating and are willing to slow down to ensure that Abby can keep up. At school, Abby indicated that there may be some staff members, especially in administration, who may not know about her learning disability, but that is only because it has not come up in her interactions with them.

With her students, Abby does not necessarily disclose right away as she wants “them to see who [she is] first” but when she does, she thinks that “they do get a sense that maybe [she understands] who they are a little bit more” and that they may feel safer “to take a risk and try new things.” Abby shared with me that she felt that these students have “experienced such chronic failure at school and [such a] lack of success [so] often, that they finally get to a place where they feel understood and heard and not judged.” She expressed that she felt that “when they put their pencil on the line, they put their self-esteem on the line,” and, as a result, she wanted to ensure they felt at ease in her classroom. She often reminds them how fortunate they are to know of their disability and to receive the accommodations they need as she was not so fortunate in her schooling years.

On the topic of disclosure, Abby confided in me that she was frustrated with student teachers who claimed that their disability helped them understand students better and made them more effective teachers than teachers without disabilities as a result. Abby believed that some people used their disabilities to get ahead of others, and this made her uncomfortable. She stated that:

They may understand a few people who have really specific disabilities, but it doesn’t help them understand students as a whole. To be a good teacher, you need to be a good practitioner and you might have some understanding of disability that other people
without disability might not have but … it can’t be your entry point into being a good teacher.

This may be a reason why Abby does not disclose unless it is truly relevant.

**Accommodations in the workplace:** “The only accommodation I’ve ever really asked for is to trade yard duty with people in the winter-time if it’s really, really icy and slippery on the yard when I was pregnant.” Abby does not request accommodations on the job because, as she said, she has “been fortunate in my practice that I found a practice that works really well for me.” She teaches two small groups of students at different times through the course of the day, “so I’m not teaching 36 kids and it’s extremely subject-specific.” The latter aspect is important to note because, since Abby teaches in a literacy intervention program, she just has to focus on improving literacy, rather than having to be well-versed in a variety of subjects, the curriculum on those subjects, and the best teaching practices for those subjects. Abby stated that she has built a good reputation at the Board but states that she is fortunate in that she has been able to “really carve out a niche for myself where I’m not being a generalist in teaching English and science and math and history and geography and managing all the logistics of a classroom of thirty students.” Abby stated that,

What’s central to Special Ed[ucation] is that you often have fewer students and you have more time in which to teach them because it takes them more time to learn and it’s also very subject specific teaching that I’ve been able to focus on. So I’ve been able to sort of craft or sort of devise a situation where I’m teaching fewer subjects to fewer students. So that builds in more time.

I believe that in this quotation above, Abby is justifying her use of time in teaching her students the literacy skills they are lacking by indicating that, as a result of their disabilities, they require more attention over a longer span to ensure that they are caught up to their peers. So while Abby may be teaching fewer students fewer subjects, there is a valid reason why she does so, and the
position matches her unique skill set.

If Abby was relocated to another teaching environment, perhaps a general-education classroom, she stated that she would not ask for accommodations. She stated that for first-time teachers and teachers experiencing a mid-career transition to a new teaching environment that “the first three years you usually eat, sleep and breathe teaching and you dream teaching and that’s just how it is.” It becomes easier with experience, Abby stated. A mid-career change for Abby would be challenging, in part, because of her learning disability and the amount of time it would take her to process the information she needed to teach the curriculum, but it would also be challenging for other reasons as well.

Even as she got her first exam accommodations in Grade 9, Abby has always strived for fairness with regard to her accommodations. “I’ve always been very cognizant of not wanting to take advantage or too much advantage,” she stated. She considers herself a strong advocate for getting what she needs, but always wants to be “fair and I wanted to be working on a level playing field. I didn’t want extras.” This even got to the point where she did not want to work with her supervisor, a specialist in students with disabilities, because she had heard that this supervisor worked often with students with disabilities, and assumed that this meant special treatment. Later, she realized that this was never the case and that they were a good match for each other.

Abby discussed some potential accommodations that could apply to her, although she would certainly be reluctant to ask for them. One would be a different work schedule, especially when Abby is dealing with fatigue or her body not cooperating with her:

I have real days where, I call them my ‘CP days,’ where my body just doesn’t want to do what I want it to do. And, I think the biggest way it affects me is … when you always have to keep up to everyone else’s nine-to-five schedule but your body doesn’t really want to start at nine and it really doesn’t want to go ’til five.
With regards to Abby’s learning disability, however, she cannot think of an accommodation that would be appropriate. She stated that if she felt that she needed extra time, she would “do what everybody else does and take extra time. You just do what you need to do to get your job done.” However, Abby does not feel that she works harder or longer than others as a result of her unique teaching circumstances: “It balances out. I feel like it’s a really level playing field.” It might be useful to look at Abby’s placement in the literacy intervention program as a sort of accommodation.

As mentioned previously, Abby would not ask for accommodations if she was placed in a regular classroom:

There wouldn’t be any accommodations to ask for. I don’t know what I would ask for that would be accepted because what would happen is they would say, “Well, then don’t work full time.” They would say, “Work … four days a week instead of working five if you need extra time.” Right? I don’t know that there would be, I don’t know what sorts of accommodations I could, would ask for that would actually be accepted. I have no idea. It is interesting to note that Abby felt that asking for accommodations would result in fewer working hours and I suggested more research should be done in this area to provide Abby with some accommodations that someone like Abby could ask for. She pointed out how people with physical disabilities could be accommodated but was uncertain how those with learning disabilities could be.

**Teaching Practice—Modeling Behaviours**

It is interesting to note how Abby’s experiences have shaped how she teaches today. For example, she passes on the strategies to her own students that the graduate student gave her. One of her main pieces of advice to her students is that “if things take extra time, instead of taking extra time, see of you can do less [tasks],” which reflects Abby’s own teaching practice as discussed in the previous section.
Abby provides differentiated instruction in her literacy intervention program as she will have a wide-range of learners with differing abilities, and her goal is to bring them up to grade level so that they will no longer need modifications (of grade content) on their IEPs, and instead may rely on accommodations instead. About her class, she stated that, “we are a community of learners and everybody’s working on the same stuff but it’s very much differentiated to meet individual needs within.”

As mentioned previously, Abby discloses her learning disability to her students after they first get to know her. She wants her students to learn how to feel positive and go beyond their feelings of chronic failure. She stated that she wanted them to “recognize and celebrate their strengths” and to “provide an opportunity where they feel safe to take a risk to learn new things.” At the beginning of the year, she drives home the message that: “We might not all be best friends but we can respect and honour each other’s abilities and differences and that we are here to support each other.” Perhaps it is this feeling of support that allows for marked and dramatic improvements in the students’ literacy skills, like from being able to read at a Grade 3 level after being able to read at a Grade 1 level only three months prior. Like Abby when she was in third year at university, these students become more confident: “All of a sudden, they can access their own language and their own world.”

The students receive many accommodations in Abby’s classroom that they would not receive elsewhere. Abby stated that “with [her], they obviously have what they need.” Some get extra time, some get less volume of work, some use technology, and some have other modifications on their IEPs. Abby pointed out that other teachers may say they accommodate their students, “but there’s a lot of lip-service.”

Abby has many discussions about disability and advocacy with her students in her classroom, which may be surprising to others who think that she just teaches literacy skills. A reason for this is that she recognizes that this may be the first opportunity where “they’ve had a
voice and they’ve had a place where they can talk openly and safely about what it’s like to have LD.” Just as she appreciated the company of peers with disabilities during university, her students can take reassurance in the fact that they are not the only one in the class with a disability. Like her own personal beliefs, she stays away from a medical model of disability and advocates:

In order to be a good advocate, you really have to know yourself really well … You have to know your strengths. You have to know your needs. You have to know how your disability affects you at home, in school, and in your character. You have to be able to express and understand, at that point, when you have a sense of those things, what do the experts tell us disabilities are. … What are your disabilities? How do they impact you at school? How do they impact you at home? … Then we talk about, we develop analogies for discussing what it’s like to have a learning disability and they’re always incredibly insightful and really, really powerful. … We always talk about success. We talk about advocacy as being able to get what you need to succeed in a reasonable and responsible way. We talk about rights and responsibilities because with rights come responsibility. And we talk about fairness being the fact that people get what they need to succeed, not that everybody gets the same thing.

This lengthy quotation serves as a summary of Abby’s personal beliefs that she expressed to me throughout the course of the interview and a demonstration of how her beliefs were brought out in her teaching. It is interesting to note that, although these strategies are not necessarily closely related to passing a literacy test, they help students feel confident that they know and understand themselves. She stated that many students come back later to thank her for the advocacy instruction that was built into her program, a program that she forged herself from her own life experiences.

Advice for Others

If Abby could go back in time, she would try to have more confidence in herself and not
be so hard on herself, and perhaps tell her younger self not to be “so fear-driven, like don’t be afraid, don’t not do something because you’re afraid … take a risk and try to do things.”

If Abby was to give advice to a young girl with a non-verbal learning disability who wanted to be a principal (like Abby wanted to be at some points in her life), Abby would probably say, “Go for it.” In reference to herself, she would only want to take on a job that she could do well enough to meet her standards of excellence on that job. She knows that at present with all the commitments she has in her life, and with the learning disability that affects processing information, she would not be able to perform the duties of a principal well enough to meet her high standards: “My standards, if I’m going to do a job, I want to do it really well.” She indicated that maybe this girl might be happy to meet a middle-mark and do well enough to get by, or, on the other side, be able to really effectively manage her disability and manage the volume of what might be needed—it would be hard to gauge. However, the bottom line for Abby is that if this girl really wanted to go for it, then she should.

**Advice to Me, as a Beginning Teacher with a Disability**

Abby stated that her:

number one piece of advice would be [that] if [I was] really passionate and it’s really what [I] want to do then [I should] keep working and aspiring until [I] achieve what it is that [I] want to achieve. And try to find for [myself], a position if [I] can, that capitalizes on [my] strengths.

I need to be willing to do what it takes, to know my abilities, not request accommodations all the time or exorbitantly and I should be “really clear about who [I] am and what [I] want and what you’re able to do and find ways to share those things.” I should also not be too hard on myself.
Summary of Results

It is evident that the experiences of Laurie and Abby have many similarities but also some telling differences. Both participants not only had the physical challenges of having a disability but also had to navigate challenges concerning their identity as a person with a disability. Many of these challenges have stemmed from a lack of awareness about certain disabilities, which transitioned into both participants having to work very hard to learn how to manage their disabilities, which has made them concerned about how others come to perceive them as teachers with disabilities. In the next chapter, I discuss how Laurie and Abby’s experiences relate to the extant literature and, in some ways, contribute to it.
Chapter 5

Discussion

In this chapter, I discuss the main findings of the study. First, I review the five questions that I sought to answer when I began. I provide brief answers to these questions that are now informed by the literature and by my participants. I then focus on the two participants and discuss their experiences, in light of the literature. Then the discussion turns to the contributions made to the literature based on commonalities and differences that arose from the participants’ experiences. Afterwards, I make several recommendations based on my research. Finally, I leave this thesis with some concluding remarks.

Guiding Questions

The purpose of the study was to provide a descriptive account of the experiences of two teachers with disabilities in order to report how disability influenced them both personally and professionally. I addressed five areas of interest. Firstly, how did the participants understand themselves as adults, adults with disabilities, and as adults with disabilities who are teachers? Secondly, how did disability contribute to their pedagogy and how did their experience as an educator contribute to their understanding of disability? Thirdly, for these teachers with disabilities, what was the nature of their relationships in both educational and workplace contexts? Fourthly, what was their perspective on accommodations? Finally, what advice did they have for me, as an aspiring teacher with a disability? My main objective was to gain a sense of the participants’ disability identity and to understand how they navigated some of the challenges identified in the literature, particularly focusing on the role of self-advocacy.

Understanding of Themselves

Both of my participants saw themselves as hardworking professionals who set high standards of performance for themselves and worked hard to meet or exceed those standards.
When asked if their disabilities prevented them from doing certain aspects of teaching, both said no. Despite Laurie’s hearing loss and challenges with assessing group assignments in school, she did not hesitate to do group work in her classroom, and, in fact, shared several strategies with me. Despite Abby’s non-verbal learning disability, she stated that one of the reasons why she did not use accommodations on the job was because she simply did not need them. In addition, she also wanted others to see her as a skilled and capable instructor first and not someone who was taking advantage of accommodations or who was defined by her disability. Perhaps one reason why they both did not make use of accommodations at work is because they never really had them in the first place when growing up.

As adults, teaching was not their only concern. They put their books away, took care of their families, socialized with friends, and found pleasure in doing an extracurricular activity just for themselves. Abby indicated that she pushed herself athletically whenever she got the chance, whether it be hiking, running, climbing or something else. Meanwhile, Laurie played the fiddle on stage and enjoyed sewing. The importance of a work-life balance was discussed by both. At the end of the day, with school and family commitments, both are most likely exhausted. Laurie did not know if her husband mumbles to her after work or if she has difficulty hearing him because she wants to put her hearing aids away, and Abby was thankful that her husband gets the kids off to school in the morning, so that she can focus on getting to work herself. Abby indicated that, at this point in her life, she was not looking for more. Another profession, a promotion or a transfer to another classroom would mean change and the necessity of having to process and absorb large amounts of information. She would not necessarily say no, but she would have to reconfigure her life to achieve a balance.

As individuals with disabilities, both participants did not want their disabilities to define who they were. Laurie researched hearing loss as soon as she found out that she had one and learned that she had to put the strategies she was reading about into practice in order to see if they
worked or made any sense. She identified many strategies when we spoke, indicating that carpeting and drapes muffled sound, that she worked with her class in a small room that reduced echoes, and that she asked others in her building to tell her if anything important was being said over the intercom. Abby worked with a physical trainer who understood the kinds of exercises best suited for someone with cerebral palsy, and, before that, she was fortunate to work with a graduate student with a disability like hers who taught her many strategies to cope with her learning disability. By being attentive to her disability, neither participant allows her disability to define who she is.

**Pedagogy**

It is interesting to note that, around the time that Laurie found out about her hearing loss, she became a two-way communicator. Motivated by an experience where she singled out a student for talking too much during class, only to later realize that it was because of the acoustics that she consistently heard him and not the other students, she realized the importance of seeking the ‘other’ perspective during conflict mediation or even just during instructional time. Her desire to be a two-way communicator may have stemmed from the many years she spent in isolation, being judged by peers and teachers for a disability she had little control over and no awareness of. She now works at a satellite school designed to help students who need a second chance or who do not fit in readily at the normal high schools: these students may regularly face judgment, some of which may be based on erroneous or overly simplistic conclusions (i.e., you are not paying attention). Laurie provides them with, yes, a sympathetic ear.

Abby stated to me that she felt that when her students “put their pencils on the line, they put themselves on the line.” When they arrive at her half-day literacy intervention program, they may already have experienced repeated and chronic failure, greatly reducing their confidence and self-esteem. Abby tries to build them back up again. She tells them that they are a “community of learners”—in almost the same way Laurie talks to her students—and, after they get to know her a
bit, she discloses her learning disability, telling her students of her past and telling them that they are fortunate to know what their disability is and to have accommodations readily available. Abby helps them understand their disability, staying away from a medical model, and instead focusing on how they can be successful. Abby noticed first-hand (and experienced herself) the reassurance her students found when they realized that they are not the only ones with a learning disability. Her students’ confidence and self-esteem are increased, especially when they realize that they can access their own language and world, and are smart and capable individuals.

**Workplace Relationships**

Both Laurie and Abby expressed that they had very positive relationships at work. Laurie was increasingly feeling more comfortable with disclosing her disability to others—it has been an adjustment period for her ever since she found out. She told some students, some staff, and let them tell others. Those who have known her for a long time know about her communication preferences and needs, and can let newcomers know that she has a hearing loss. She is also comfortable doing that herself.

Laurie’s students also respect her as a teacher with a disability because, by virtue of her having a disability and talking about it, she shows that not only is she human, but she is open about herself, her abilities, and her limitations. Her students appreciate this because they are struggling with the cards they were dealt, to use a metaphor from Laurie. When she asks her students to look at her when speaking to her or to speak more clearly, she noted, they are more likely to listen to her than to a teacher without a disability, because she is asking them to accommodate her. She is inviting them to communicate on the same level as her.

Abby appreciates that she has worked with the same colleagues for a long time, and they know her well, beyond her disabilities. She stated that she has built for herself a good reputation and that others can look to her for support and guidance. She has students who return to her later in their schooling to confide in her. If they are having trouble socially in their schools, she will
share her experience of switching to a new school. Students come to tell her how much they appreciated her building advocacy-related discussions into her literacy program.

Trading Advice

As a qualitative researcher, I am happy that I was able to interact with my participants. It is hard to have a conversational style if you are the one asking all the questions; however, with both participants, I promised I would tell them details about myself after the interviews (and I promise I will tell the reader a little bit about myself, too). Through the interview process, we built a rapport, and I genuinely felt as if both my participants cared about me and wanted to see me succeed.

Laurie’s advice to me was mainly about the benefits of reaching out to my students for their input. She told me that they would appreciate me putting myself out there and, with their voices being heard, I would be less likely to make a hasty decision and would know what the other side of the story was. Abby told me to be persistent and go after what I wanted and not give up, to not let fear or doubt slow me down. Abby also advised that I try to find a position that played to my strengths and in which I could build up a reputation based on successes. She also expressed caution about using accommodations—that I did not want to rely too much on them so it caused other people to think that my disability defined who I was.

If I could be so presumptuous as to give them advice in return, I would encourage them, like me, to continue learning about applicable accommodations, even if it is only for their students. I do not want them to miss out on something that could make their jobs easier. They both have certainly built reputations of being very competent professionals, and I am sure no one would think less of them for wanting to try something different or new. As Laurie mentioned, you need to try it to see if it works for you.
Two Teachers with Disabilities

In this section, I discuss my two participants’ experiences in view of the literature that was discussed in Chapter Two. The majority of the headings used in Chapter Four were aligned with aspects of Gill’s (1997) disability identity integration model and Test et al.’s (2005) self-advocacy framework and, because they provided a wealth of information, I use them again here.

Disability Identity

Awareness. Both participants had a disability that was not revealed to them until much later in life. Laurie was diagnosed with having a hearing loss in her 40s, whereas Abby was diagnosed with a learning disability at 21. Both had a hard time in school due to not knowing about their disability, and this trouble showed itself in lowered grades. According to Gill (1997), individuals with disabilities must proceed through a series of stages in order to, ultimately, accept themselves as being individuals with disabilities. However, in these two cases, simply finding out about one’s disability was a hurdle to jump over.

What is interesting to note is that there were different reasons for the delay in finding out about their disability. Laurie’s father was quick to attribute Laurie’s hearing loss as having been caused by a childhood incident in which a boy fired an air rifle close to her ear; yet, Laurie’s family or Laurie’s school did not figure out that she had a disability. Her struggles in math and with group work were attributed to her not focusing or paying attention, and no other explanation was sought, perhaps due to a lack of general awareness about hearing loss. Laurie’s self-esteem and interactions with her peers were compromised.

Abby was aware of her cerebral palsy at a young age, and was also aware of how she was being perceived by others at her school, others who had known her before she could shape and control her own identity. In marked contrast to Gill’s model (1997), Abby left mainstream society—for another mainstream society—and sought to ‘manage’ her disability so that it did not define who she was. Furthermore, to make matters more complicated, when Abby found out she
had a learning disability, she did not reject mainstream society; she lived with her non-disabled best friend at university. She also enjoyed the company of a group of disabled friends, because she felt that she did not need to be anyone else but herself with them and could take pride in their accomplishments as well as her own. By spending time with a graduate student with a learning disability, she was able to become aware of strategies she could use to level the playing field and also became aware that she was a smart and capable individual.

Both of my participants’ experiences show that, if there is little awareness of one’s disability, then appropriate accommodations or actions are unlikely, and misattributions and a lack of support can do a great deal of harm. It is evident that Laurie and Abby’s prior experiences with accommodations, and more or less having to find their own way through their schooling, has had an impact on their use of accommodations now.

As Ferri et al. (2005) examined the various discourses that appeared to inform teachers’ views of their own learning disability and discovered that students provided their own discourse, my participants, I believe, have learned a great deal from their students as well as from the medical and activist literature about their own disabilities. It was evident that, as Abby described what goes on in her program, she was influenced by her previous life experience. However, this could work two ways and her students could be giving her a new perspective to examine her own experiences. Laurie learned about misattribution with the student whom she singled out in the classroom for talking too much and now is aware of the benefits of opening the lines of communication. Both participants learned from medical sources of information but made sure to apply that information in their own way—making it personal and acting on the information. For example, Laurie applied the information she learned from a brochure she read to see if it was helpful, while Abby was involved in a Learning Disabilities Association which would have made scientific and academic information about learning disabilities accessible to the mainstream public.
**Definition of Disability.** Both Laurie and Abby believe that disability is more than just the medical definition: a limitation. Both participants see having a disability as creating the necessity to strategize: to know what one is not good at is not an excuse to stop there; rather, it is an opportunity to find out what one is good at. A problem or a challenge, such as how to mark oral presentations, may not be solved with the most conventional solution—hearing everything—but it can be solved by looking at the options available; for example, preparation notes, body language, and student assessors may be good alternatives. It is in this way that Laurie’s modifications reflect the accommodations discussed in Brueggemann et al.’s (2005) paper: they serve a dual purpose, in that they not only help the teacher, but provide fresh opportunities to the students for learning.

It is evident that both Laurie and Abby view disability mostly through a social lens or through the social model of disability. Even though Laurie did not reference this social model, she expressed that, although accommodations were readily available to her, it was up to her to implement them, and sometimes she would get too intimidated by others to do so. In the social model of disability, the environment and social interactions with others are a key aspect, as opposed to one’s own biological mechanisms. Abby, perhaps with her Master of Education on learning disabilities, was aware of the presence of the social model of disability and indicated it was her ability to navigate her environment that indicated whether she was disabled.

**Acceptance.** Both participants engage in activities that might be unexpected. For example, Laurie does not let her hearing loss prevent her from playing the fiddle and supporting a two-way communication style, and Abby recovered from low grades in high school to complete a Master’s degree in Education and pushes her body to its limits hiking, running, and climbing, despite her cerebral palsy. Abby indicated to me that she wondered if she was being accepting of herself due to the way she constantly pushed herself to go above and beyond her own and others’ expectations. Many studies about teachers with disabilities, such as Ferri et al. (2001), discuss
how they may feel the need to compensate for their disability and, in so doing, overcompensate. Although Abby is not necessarily passing as a non-disabled person, since she does disclose her cerebral palsy to those with whom she exercises, she did question whether or not she was being accepting of herself. However, she certainly can be proud of her accomplishments, regardless of what motivated her to do them.

**Disability kinship.** Although Abby appeared to have more experience interacting with peers with disabilities, both expressed their appreciation for having the chance to talk with someone else with a disability, which I reciprocated. Abby explained that it was sometimes easier to just talk to someone who ‘got it’ naturally and who had the lived experience of having a disability, similar to what Gill (1997) states about finding kinship with those who have disabilities. Both Abby and Laurie used their disabilities as a way to reach out to their students. While only some of Laurie’s students had disabilities, many faced different kinds of life challenges and could relate to Laurie’s experiences; and all of Abby’s students were identified with a learning disability. It is interesting that both participants learned from people with disabilities: Laurie learned from watching her father-in-law and how others interacted with him, while Abby learned from the graduate student who helped her impress her professors.

**Self-Advocacy**

**Agency.** Agency is choice. Laurie decides to put in her hearing aids every day and sometimes prefers the quiet of not having them. (I, too, love the peace and quiet that comes when I take off my cochlear implant). Abby simply has to look at a map to find yet another mountain she wants to conquer.

Agency is also independence and an ability to strike one’s own path. Abby indicated that she was on her own when she first learned about accommodations with her family friend for her exams in high school, that she was on her own when she went to ask for accommodations in the newly-discovered Special Education office at her university, that she worked hard to develop the
strategies shared by the graduate student, and that she proved herself to be qualified to run a literacy intervention program for students with learning disabilities—all on her own.

Both Laurie and Abby overcame the lack of awareness about their disabilities, put their best efforts into improving their grades towards the end of high school, became teachers and not only found, but chose, positions that honoured their strengths. Perhaps it is because both participants came from families that were supportive but also encouraged independence and resilience that they did not demonstrate any of the ‘learned helplessness’ often discussed in the literature for students with disabilities, including Bargerhuff et al.’s (2012) study on the current state of student teachers being involved in a student teaching program.

Disclosure and accommodations. It is fascinating to note that due to each participants’ own self-determination and agency in their own affairs, they were able to essentially make up their own accommodations. Abby counted herself fortunate to work in the special education field, where typically individualized attention and small numbers are the norm. Laurie had experience working in regular high schools but opted to work instead with youth who were having challenges with regular schooling and, as such, also experienced low numbers. Laurie made accommodations for herself such as telling others to let her know if anything important was said over the intercom, and having her literacy class in a small classroom. As she says, preferences are okay.

Another aspect that warrants further inquiry is whether their workplaces were environments suitable for investigating accommodations for teachers with disabilities. Both participants were quick to name accommodations that were applicable to students, but uncertain if any would apply to themselves and, if so, how they would be implemented. Abby indicated that she felt that if she requested more time for processing information, she would be given fewer hours at work. I believe that because my participants do not want their disability to define them, they are somewhat reluctant to look at accommodations for themselves.
I struggle with the following question: would Laurie and Abby be better off with formalized accommodations? They appear to be doing quite fine with their own created accommodations, and there is some uncertainty about how management would help them more. Is there harm in asking for accommodations, just to try them, in Laurie’s words? I do not know, and I do not want the participants to risk their reputations as independent and able individuals.

With regards to disclosure, Abby’s experiences better reflect the experiences of Olney and Brockelman’s (2003) participants who disclosed their disability during strategic intervals, more than Gill’s (1997) and Bargerhuff et al.’s (2012) assertions that not disclosing indicates either a lack of acceptance or a lack of awareness about oneself. Abby indicated she was a very strong advocate and was not afraid to ask for what she needed or wanted; however, the times in which she did not disclose, she did not want others to immediately have her disability define who she was.

Laurie’s experience about disclosure would reflect Gill’s (1997) model, in that, as she became more aware about her hearing loss, she felt more comfortable disclosing to others. However, I would argue that, as her actions about only telling a few people so that they would tell others indicates, she is also being strategic and conserving her energy and letting others come to her. Some people do not know about my participants’ disabilities simply because it does not concern them.

**Contributions to the Literature and Areas for Further Inquiry**

In this section, I describe aspects of the participants’ experiences that may warrant further inquiry and aspects that make contributions to the extant literature.

**Gill’s (1997) Disability Identity Integration Model**

A change that I made while revising the literature review was describing my development as a researcher over the last year. I initially headed my Disability Identity Theories section Disability Identity Theory and credited Gill with founding this. I realized that people with
disabilities’ identities were so complex that one theory or model could never hope to do the identity justice. In other words, I forgot that people with disabilities were people, and that all the general theories about identity were also applicable.

Gill (1997) theorizes that in order to find acceptance of ourselves as people with disabilities, we must go through four stages which ultimately have us leaving mainstream society only to return to it with the desire to change it. While I believe that Gill is right to say that we must find ways to integrate our disability with ourselves—and makes a good point that we often speak about disabilities in a derogatory manner—her vision of these four stages in a set order is restrictive and does not mirror the experiences of my participants and myself. Laurie became aware of her disability at a late age, so she spent most of her time in Stage Zero, and, at the point where she became aware of her disability, she did not feel a need to distance herself from mainstream society. Although she was very introspective at times and was nervous to disclose her disability, she did not have a disability kinship stage. I believe there is a need in the literature to map out what influences someone’s perceptions of disability and that could be the basis of re-examining disability identity theory. Ostrander’s (2008) critique is also appropriate as there may be other aspects to our identity that are more pressing at certain times; such as, in the case of my participants, being a mother. Finally, Olney and Brockelman’s (2003) support for strategic disclosures is very compelling—one does not come out of the closet once, but rather many times, depending on who asks or who does not ask. Sometimes, as Brueggemann et al.’s (2005) conversation asked, does it matter?

**Relationship between Acceptance of One’s Disability and Self-Advocacy**

The overlap between Gill’s (1997) disability identity integration and Test et al.’s self-advocacy models seemed to allow for the logical inference that if one was fully accepting of oneself as an individual with a disability, then he or she would be more likely to advocate for him- or herself—such as disclose or ask for accommodations for the job—and advocate for
others. My research indicates that the ability to self-advocate does not necessarily come from acceptance of oneself (if that was even possible to do completely). Both participants advocate for their students each day, yet, are unsure of what accommodations would be useful for themselves. Additionally, both participants appear to be accepting of themselves as individuals with disabilities, but choose to disclose their disabilities selectively and strategically as was discussed by Olney and Brockelman (2003). This realization has expanded my thinking since the beginning of this study and it is evident that teachers—as human beings, who are working on different aspects of their selves, each and every day—can prove to be worthy role models and advocates when it matters most.

**Test et al.’s (2005) Self-Advocacy Framework**

In response to Gill’s (1997) disability identity integration model, a viable alternative (even though I thought both were similar at first) is Test et al.’s self-advocacy framework. It is more methodologically sound, as Gill’s only source is her clinical practice and personal experience, whereas Test et al. developed their framework from a review of the literature and input from stakeholders. The self-advocacy framework was created in order to address the gap in self-advocacy instruction in elementary and secondary school where Bargerhuff et al. noted the notion of learned helplessness was taking root. Students were, and may still not be prepared for a future where the school board does not provide them with accommodations. Test et al. responded to this issue and they firmly advocate that the student (or, as I generally derived from it, the individual) with a disability has agency and control over their learning, their actions, and their environment, and with the proper resources and skills (as created by the foundation of knowing one’s self and knowing one’s rights), one can succeed at self-advocacy (which requires communication and leadership). Perhaps after many successes, or being consistently appropriately accommodated, the individual with a disability can come to integrate their disability within the many other facets of the self.
Independence and Resilience

Bargerhuff et al. (2012) indicates that the phenomenon of learned helplessness, or the tendency to think that one is helpless and in need of assistance by others from one situation to the next, is a common occurrence at their US School of Education for their student teachers with disabilities. The authors cited several student teachers with disabilities that were not able to state what qualities they possessed that made them competent and valuable teachers.

This is in marked contrast to Laurie and Abby. Both grew up with families that were supportive when needed, but which also encouraged independence and resilience from a very young age. Both Laurie and Abby were the first in their families to pursue higher education, so they needed to find the motivation and drive to overcome a disability that was not yet identified in order to have high enough marks to go to university. Abby switched high schools to start over on a clean slate while Laurie discovered that she did not want to be in a cubicle for the rest of her life. Both participants remarked that their parents were accepting but ultimately let their children determine their future. I believe Laurie and Abby’s independence and resilience ensured their success in post-secondary education and helped them strategize to find positions that played to their strengths. During interviews, they were able to point at qualities that they possessed that made them worthy candidates for the positions they sought.

When examining their responses to how Laurie and Abby defined disability in general, it became evident that both participants looked beyond the negative aspects of disability, and seized upon the opportunities (or the necessity) of having to adapt and strategize in order to achieve their goals. As both participants indicated, one has to look beyond the ‘dis’ to find the differing ‘abilities’ that are honed as a result of having a disability. In this way, my participants avoided stereotypical disability narratives of pity and shame and are in a better position to ensure students can come to accept themselves and work with, as Laurie is fond of saying, the cards they are dealt.
An Environment that Honours Your Strengths

As mentioned before, both participants acted, whether knowingly or maybe sometimes even unknowingly, in ways that would prove accommodating to them in the end. Both found teaching environments that were conducive to their needs and made use of their abilities. This is reflective of how individuals with learning disabilities in Gerber et al.’s (2004) study sometimes benefitted from unplanned circumstances that benefitted them as individuals with learning disabilities. However, in contrast to the ‘learned helplessness’ that manifested with these participants, my participants showed strong self-determination to prove their competence. It would be informative to examine the accommodations individuals with disabilities create for themselves (as I type this, I am using my parents’ big-screen television as a computer monitor). I wonder if perhaps people with disabilities have been more resourceful than they have been given credit for in the extant literature.

It is important to recognize that it is not just people with disabilities who can benefit from finding environments and careers that play to one’s strengths—rather this is advice shared in many self-help books for a reason. As both Abby and Laurie mentioned, there are things that we are not good at, but that does not mean we have a disability with regards to those things: we can all strategize to find ways to overcome or go around the obstacles we face.

The Role of Teachers with Disabilities in Schools

As stated by Pritchard (2010), “Seeing ‘oneself’ reflected in the classroom can be a life-changing experience for a student with a disability” (p. 44). In the course of this research, one of my favourite questions to ask others was whether they remembered having a teacher with a disability in school. The literature indicates that even the mere presence of a teacher with a disability in a school provides an example to others that individuals with disabilities can succeed and hold influential positions in society. For example, Ferri et al. (2001) discussed the desire of their participants, teachers with learning disabilities, to show their students that, they too, could
be successful. The manner in which Abby integrates the requirements of her literacy intervention program with the teaching and practice of advocacy skills is demonstrative of how a teacher with a disability can use his or her past experiences to aid students in the present. Having a teacher with a disability at a school is both symbolic and practical. Teachers with disabilities not only represent the success that can be had if environments are made more inclusive and accessible, but, as seen in the literature, the disabilities that they have, as well as the experiences around those disabilities, are assets in the classroom (e.g., Brueggemann et al., 2005; Griffiths, 2012).

In the case of Laurie and Abby, who, like me, are not necessarily completely ‘integrated’ with their disability identity, it is important to recognize that this is not a prerequisite to being an effective teacher. This is one way that I see Gill’s (1997) model as being detrimental, as it fails to recognize that many of us feel that we take a few steps back for every major leap forward in learning about who we are and what we are capable of. In both Laurie’s and Abby’s experiences, it was evident that they garnered respect and admiration for simply sharing their life experiences and their hopes with their students. Being an effective teacher does not mean that one knows all the answers, but rather that one can learn and use prior experiences to help motivate students to succeed.

During my defense, an important question was raised that I had neglected to consider: is it necessary for a teacher with a disability to disclose his or her disability to the students? Bargerhuff et al. (2012) indicated that disclosure of one’s disability should be mandated when pursuing a teaching position, as disclosing one’s disability indicated, among other characteristics, knowledge of self, initiative (although that initiative may have been taken away simply by expecting disclosure), and leadership. Brockelman’s (2003) study, however, indicates at the contextual nature of disclosure—sometimes it is appropriate to disclosure, and other times, it is only detrimental to do so, and this does not necessarily have to do with a lack of acceptance or leadership. Abby chose certain times to disclose her disability because she did not want her
students to immediately think about her disability without having laid down the groundwork so that they would see her first as a competent individual who was in charge of their care and learning.

With regards to teaching self-advocacy to students with disabilities, is it necessary that a teacher with a disability teach them or have disclosed his or her disability to teach them? While teachers with disabilities potentially possess an unique ability to connect to students with disabilities, since they both live, every day, the experience of being part of a minority group that is often disadvantaged and discriminated against, the only requirement in order to teach about self-advocacy may just be the ability to relate to the life experiences of those with disabilities. That said, teachers with disabilities are in an unique position to share their experiences and stories with those around them.

Having at least one teacher with a disability at your school who is not afraid to discuss his or her disability with those who are interested in finding out more information, demonstrates to everyone that people with disabilities can be successful and hold influential positions in society, regardless of their supposed physical limitations.

**Accommodation Knowledge**

This has been touched upon previously but, I believe, deserves restating. In Church’s (2006) discussion chapter, she expressed that one of the main findings of her research was that employees with disabilities needed to learn not only how to do the job that was expected of them, but also how to manage their disabilities on the job. I believe that there are still attitudinal and social barriers that prevent full disclosures about one’s disability from taking place because there is a fear that others will not see past one’s disability or will think that one is taking advantage. This could cause harm to those who do require accommodations, and who, with those accommodations can make valuable contributions to their workplaces. I hope to one day live in a society where, as a person with a disability, I just need to learn how to do my job, not worry
about whether or not I should ask for accommodations or prove myself worthy by doing without accommodations. As an education researcher, I found learning about workplace law for this thesis to be rather intimidating, and I hope to return to this area better informed myself.

**Recommendations Based on Research**

In line with my chosen research methodology, I wish to help enact positive change for individuals with disabilities.

**More Awareness of Disability**

Laurie and I made this recommendation together during our interview. She genuinely wished that she had known earlier about her hearing loss and remarked that in her teaching education, she did not learn about disabilities. I understand that teacher education has changed greatly since Laurie first became a teacher, but information about disabilities and identification of those disabilities is critically important, especially when discussing Laurie and Abby’s experiences. In addition to these kinds of information, I do believe that it would be helpful if some time was spent discussing the identity challenges that come with having a disability, which can sometimes outweigh the physical and mental challenges of having a disability.

Representation of people with disabilities from all different walks of life in all sectors of society is also needed in order to greatly improve the ways in which we talk about people with disabilities. As a result, we can come to talk about people with disabilities as people. Talking about disability more will mean less ignorance, fear, and stigma associated with it. It is time for disability to come out of the closet!

**Accessible Infrastructure**

Here in Ontario, Bill 115, Regulation 274/12 (Hiring Practices) makes it law that one must become an occasional teacher before taking on a more permanent position. For teachers with disabilities, the temporary and quickly changeable conditions of being a supply teacher may not be very accessible and may not allow a teacher with a disability to display his or her strengths.
very well. Both Laurie and Abby consider themselves fortunate to have positions now that enable them to use their strengths.

Bargerhuff et al.’s (2012) model for improving the teaching program at the US School of Education could be extended to teachers with disabilities. There could be supports in place that allow teachers with disabilities to be assessed in order to find out where their strengths lie, and positions could be found throughout school boards that best meet those strengths—even if they require a consistent, quiet place which to work, fewer students, and specific materials that are to be taught, like the accommodations that my participants found for themselves. Support should be given to teachers wondering if they would benefit from accommodations, and accommodations should be ‘tried’ and ‘tested’ to see if they work, not set in stone—this almost sounds like an Individual Education Plan, but for a teacher, and why not? What changes because a teacher graduates from high school? In the literature, it was evident that schools prioritized accessibility and inclusivity for students with disabilities, whereas for teachers with disabilities, there were more questions than answers. Let us start answering these questions together and make active efforts to recruit teachers with disabilities.

It is important to recognize that teachers with disabilities may require additional supports to help them accept themselves as competent individuals who have a great deal to offer if only they are given the chance to do so. They need not apologize for their disability upon entering a classroom.

Social Support

Encouraging disability kinship is important. Both my participants and myself felt a desire to communicate to someone with a disability and to be understood: the strength of this desire may be indicative of the limited amount of contact that exists amongst people with disabilities. When specifically looking at teachers with disabilities, with their scarce numbers, it can be assumed that they do not often get a chance to network or form relationships with each other. Perhaps school
boards could facilitate meetings between staff and teachers with disabilities so that they have a chance to get to know each other and to deal with pertinent disability-related issues that come up in the workplace, such as how to raise awareness about a specific type of disability, or what to do about the missing plank in the wheelchair ramp. After the issues have been dealt with, there is no reason why a social activity cannot be enjoyed by all staff and teachers interested in getting to know one another better.

Michael McNeely

Here is some information about myself, as promised.

My name is Michael. I was born profoundly deaf and hear with the assistance of a cochlear implant. I also have some vision challenges which make me legally blind and these, in combination, make me legally deafblind. I do not want my disability to define who I am: I want to be known as someone who is passionate about equality in education, and about literature, video games, and movies. I am proud of myself for finishing this thesis, not because I’m a person with a disability who finished a thesis even though, at times, I wondered if I belonged in the Faculty of Education. I am proud of myself for finishing this thesis because that is reason enough to be proud.

I am indulging myself with this section, but I want to finish with a story. When I was just starting my first student teaching placement, I was asked to introduce myself to the class. I went up to the front and said, “My name is Mr. McNeely, and I look forward to teaching you. Just so you know, I’m deaf and have some vision challenges so you may need to speak clearly and make sure I know that you’re speaking to me.” I promptly sat down and assumed we would resume talking about trench warfare in WWI. However, I was mistaken and, like Bruegageman (2005) and her colleagues indicated, the curiosity unleashed was a powerful force to be reckoned with. I am still trying to figure out how to harness this force as a person, an educator, and a researcher.
References


Retrieved from http://www.aoda.ca/?page_id=8#partii

Appleyard, Trish. (2013). Correspondence [email and in person].


Appendix A
Recruitment Script / E-mail to Teachers

Subject: Invitation to participate in study

Body:

My name is Michael McNeely and I am studying for my Master’s of Education at Queen’s University. I am a novice teacher with a disability and I am interested in speaking with teachers with disabilities in order to better understand their experiences.

My study is entitled “Insider perspectives: How being a teacher with a disability influences practice.” If you have taught for at least three years and identify yourself as an individual with a disability, I would be interested in interviewing you about how your disability affects you personally and professionally.

I am interested in how you understand yourself as both a person with a disability and as a teacher with a disability, and how this understanding translates into your teaching practice. I will also ask if you have any advice for aspiring teachers with disabilities, like myself.

The study will require one interview of approximately ninety minutes. There will also be a requested follow-up interview of approximately thirty minutes so that I can go over the transcript of the previous interview with you and see if you want to make any changes.

There are no known physical, psychological, economic, or social risks associated with this study. I will do all I can to keep your responses confidential. However, since teachers with disabilities are a small, specialized group, others may be able to identify you based on what references you make. Please keep this in mind as you decide what to tell me. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

If we do an interview, you will be compensated with a $10 gift card for either Starbucks or Tim Horton’s, and your insights and contributions to research will be very much appreciated.

Thank you for your time. If you would like to participate or have any questions or concerns, please contact me at 6mm12@queensu.ca.

Sincerely,
Michael McNeely
Appendix B
Letter of Information and Consent Form

Letter of Information

“Insider perspectives: How being a teacher with a disability influences practice” This research is being conducted by Michael McNeely under the supervision of Dr. Nancy Hutchinson, in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario. This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines, and Queen’s policies.

What is this study about? The purpose of the proposed study is to provide a descriptive account of the experiences of several teachers with disabilities in order to report how disability influences them both personally and professionally. I am interested in how you understand yourself as both a person with a disability and as a teacher with a disability, and how this understanding translates into your teaching practice. I will also ask if you have any advice for aspiring teachers with disabilities, like myself. The study will require one interview of approximately ninety minutes. There will also be a requested follow-up interview of approximately thirty minutes so that I can go over the transcript of the previous interview with you and see if you want to make any changes. Both interviews will be audio-recorded.

Are there any risks to doing the study? There are no known physical, psychological, economic, or social risks associated with this study. I will do all I can to maintain confidentiality. However, since teachers with disabilities are a small, specialized group, others may be able to identify you based on what references you make. Please keep this in mind as you decide what to tell me.

Is my participation voluntary? Yes. Although it be would be greatly appreciated if you would answer all material as frankly as possible, you should not feel obliged to answer any material that you find objectionable or that makes you feel uncomfortable. You may also withdraw (stop answering questions) at any time. If you withdraw from participating, you may request removal of all or part of your data.

What will happen to my responses? We will keep your responses confidential. Only Michael McNeely’s research team (supervisor, committee member, and intervenor) will have access to this information. Confidentiality will be maintained to the extent possible. The data may also be published in professional journals or presented at scientific conferences, but any such presentations will be of general findings and will never breach individual confidentiality. Should you be interested, you are entitled to a copy of the findings. In accordance with the Faculty of Education’s policy, data will be retained for a minimum of five years, and then will either be destroyed or remain indefinitely. If data is used for secondary analysis it will contain no identifying information.

Will I be compensated for my participation? Yes, you will receive a $10 gift card from Starbucks or Tim Hortons depending on your preference.

What if I have concerns? Any questions about study participation may be directed to Michael McNeely at 6mm12@queensu.ca or his supervisor Nancy Hutchinson at 613-533-3025 and hutchinn@queensu.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca.
Consent Form

“Insider perspectives: How being a teacher with a disability influences practice”

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Michael McNeely. Retain the second copy for your records.

Name (please print clearly): ________________________________________

1. I have read the Letter of Information and have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.

2. I understand that I will be participating in the study called Insider perspectives: How being a teacher with a disability influences practice. I understand that this means that I will be interviewed for 90 minutes, and that the interview will be recorded to aid transcription later of what is said. I will also be contacted for a voluntary follow-up interview of 30 minutes which will also be tape recorded, and I can decline this if I wish.

3. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time. If I withdraw from participating, I can request removal of all or part of my data. I understand that every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of the data now and in the future. Only Michael McNeely’s research team will have access to my information. The data may also be published in professional journals or presented at scientific conferences, but any such presentations will be of general findings and will never breach individual confidentiality. Should you be interested, you are entitled to a copy of the findings.

4. Any questions about study participation may be directed to Michael McNeely at 6mm12@queensu.ca or his supervisor Nancy Hutchinson at 613-533-3025 and hutchinn@queensu.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

I have read the above statements and freely consent to participate in this research:

Signature: _______________________________ Date: __________________

Please provide contact information below if you would like a copy of the results of the study:
Appendix C
Interview Schedule

My interview questions are divided by sub-topic and a brief rationale is provided for each sub-topic.

Background Information

For these questions, I am interested in getting an idea of the participant’s personality, experience with teaching, and also to build rapport with the participant by asking easy, comfortable questions first.

1) How many years have you spent teaching?
2) Do you have any extracurricular or out of school experiences working with children?
3) In which subjects and grades do you specialize?
4) Did you do anything else other than teaching for a profession or career?
5) What hobbies and interests do you have?

Disability Identity

Here, I am interested in seeing how the participant fits in with the disability identity literature that I have studied. Are they knowledgeable and comfortable about disability in general and their disability specifically? I am also interested in whether they have had positive or negative experiences with disability.

6) Can you tell me what the word ‘disability’ means to you?
7) How does your disability make you feel?
8) If you have had your disability in childhood, can you tell me about your experiences growing up with a disability?
   a) What was your home environment like?
   b) What was school like for you? How did you feel about the accommodations that you received?
c) How would you describe your peer relationships?

9) Has your disability affected you as a person? If so, how?

10) Can you tell me if there ever would be a time you would hide your disability from others? Why or why wouldn’t you hide the disability?

11) Was there ever a time where you wished you did not have a disability?

12) What do you think is the most reliable source of information about disability?

13) What are other important characteristics to your identity aside from your disability? I.e. religion, race?

*Teaching with a Disability*

For this section, I am interested in determining how disability influences practice, and also how practice influences disability.

14) What motivated you to become a teacher?

15) How would you say your disability influences your pedagogy?

   a) Teaching?

   b) Classroom management?

   c) Lesson delivery?

16) How has being a teacher influenced how you understand your disability?

17) How would you describe your interactions with staff? How do you relate to their perspectives?

18) How would you describe your interactions with your students? How do you relate to their perspectives?

19) How are students with disabilities treated at your school? If at all, how do you provide specific support for these students?

*Negotiating Accommodations*

These questions examine the participant’s experiences from a workplace context in order
to determine whether they support the relationships found in the literature between having a positive disability identity and being able to access appropriate accommodations.

20) Do you use accommodations for your job? If so, what kinds of accommodations do you use and why?

21) Would there be any others from which you would benefit? Describe them.

22) What is the process of asking for accommodations?

23) How do you know what accommodations you need?

24) How do you feel about accommodations?

*Advice*

What would they like me and others to take away from their experiences?

25) What advice do you have for a person like me, with a disability, who aspires to a career as a teacher?

*Additional Information*

Is there anything that I missed?

26) Is there anything else you would like to add?
Appendix D
Confidentiality Agreement for Intervenor

Insider Perspectives: How Being a Teacher with a Disability Influences Practice
Intervenor Confidentiality Agreement
Michael McNeely, Faculty of Education
Queen's University at Kingston
Kingston, Ontario K7L 3N6
August 21, 2012

I have read and retained the Letter of Information concerning the research Insider Perspectives: How Being a Teacher with a Disability Influences Practice being conducted by Michael McNeely. In my role as intervenor for the researcher, I understand the nature of the study and the requirements for confidentiality. I have had all of my questions concerning the nature of the study and my role as intervenor/transcriber answered to my satisfaction.

A. Maintaining Confidentiality

I agree not to reveal in any way to any person other than the researcher any data gathered for the study by means of my services as interpreter.

B. Acknowledgement of My Services as Intervenor

I understand that the researcher will acknowledge the use of my services in any reporting on the research. I have indicated below whether I wish that acknowledgement to be anonymous or whether it may recognize me by name.

___ I do not wish my name to be associated with the acknowledgement of the use of an interpreter in data gathering for the research.

OR

___ I agree that the researcher may associate my name with the acknowledgement of the use of an interpreter in data gathering for the research.

C. Identification and Signature Indicating Agreement

Name: ____________________________________________
Email: ____________________________________________
Telephone: _________________________________________
Mailing Address: ___________________________________
Signature: __________________________________________

Any questions about study participation may be directed to Michael McNeely at 6mm12@queensu.ca or my supervisor Nancy Hutchinson at 613-533-3025 and hutchinn@queensu.ca. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or chair.GREB@queensu.ca.