Anna’s Story: Narratives of Personal Experience About Being Labeled Learning Disabled

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The narratives of personal experience of an adolescent named Anna provided insights into two issues: first, how well her discourse conformed to linguistic expectations for the types of narrative traditionally deemed acceptable in school, and second, the themes associated with the presentation of self that Anna and her peers addressed when talking about their personal experiences as students labeled learning disabled. By narrative, we mean the root metaphor for human sense-making that is described in the following epigraph by Bruner. We found that Anna’s narrative differed from typical school-based expectations in that its structure was reminiscent of the oral tradition. From the group of students, we heard themes of isolation, underestimation, and oppression. We recommend a more thoughtful and respectful approach to educational decision making that gives voice to students.

There are two irreducible modes of cognitive functioning—or more simply, two modes of thought [i.e., paradigmatic science and narrative knowing, respectively]—each meriting the status of a “natural kind.” Each provides a way of ordering experience, of constructing reality, and the two (though amenable to complementary use) are irreducible to one another. Each also provides ways of organizing representation in memory and of filtering the perceptual world. Efforts to reduce one mode to the other or to ignore one at the expense of the other inevitably fail to capture the rich ways in which people “know” and describe events around them.

Each of the ways of knowing, moreover, has operating principles of its own and its own criteria of well-formedness. But they differ radically in their procedures for establishing truth. One verifies by appeal to formal verification procedures and empirical proof. The other establishes not truth but truth-likeness or verisimilitude. It has been claimed that the one is a refinement of or an abstraction from the other. But this must either be false or true only in the most trivial way, for in their full development, the one seeks explications that are context free and universal, and the other seeks explications that are context sensitive and particular. Moreover, there is no direct way in which a statement derived from one mode can contradict or even corroborate a statement from the other. As Rorty has recently put it, one mode is centered around the narrow epistemological question of how to know the truth; the other around the broader and more inclusive question of the meaning of experience. (Bruner, 1985, pp. 97–98)

It is ironic that in special education, a field devoted to improving the quality of life for people with disabilities, we have almost no acquaintance with those people in our literature. We have an array of means and standard deviations that characterize students with disabilities as "subjects" in groups or subgroups, and a significantly smaller set of case studies that report investigators' observations about these "subjects," but it is difficult to find instances in which we hear from the people themselves (Mishler, 1993). We do not know how they understand their problems and needs. We have studied them, planned for them, educated them, and erased them. We have not listened to their voices. In this study, we examine the role that personal-experience narratives play in one adolescent woman’s understanding of her learning disability. During our discussions with six adolescents, it was Anna who was the most open about describing her expe-
riences as a student labeled learning disabled. It was for this reason that we selected Anna’s interview for in-depth study. The other students, although more reticent, echoed her concerns.

To give voice to Anna and her peers, we chose to elicit the less well-known, less well-studied mode of thought described by Bruner (1985) in the epigraph. (The other mode of thought is, of course, paradigmatic science.) Humans throughout the ages and in every culture have understood their lives and created their identities by emplotting life events into stories (Bruner, 1990; Mishler, 1992). Consequently, narrative is the “root metaphor” for human meaning making (Sarbin, 1986), and narrative inquiry focuses on individuals’ stories.

Narrative inquiry is important for at least two reasons: First, people experience time as it unfolds in events (Ricoeur, 1981); by endowing life events with temporal and causal relations, they both answer the question “Who am I?” and define the range of possibilities for their futures. Second, narrative gives voice to the persons we study. Although it has a long and honored tradition in history and literature, the value of narrative inquiry for psychology and education is just being discovered (Carter, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988). Narrative inquiry is one means of addressing Flavell’s (1992) musing that we might want to add personal profiles to our knowledge base, to discover “what it is like to be them [in this case, students with language/learning disabilities] and what the world seems like to them, given what they have and have not achieved” (p. 1003).

Students with language/learning disabilities have long been reported to demonstrate sustained difficulties with narrative structure. The research suggests that those problems might be related to (a) difficulty knowing when to use acquired cognitive strategies (Swanson, 1992); (b) lack of linguistic sophistication in using such devices as cohesive organization (Liles, 1985) and/or causal inferencing (Ackerman, 1986); (c) constructive memory errors (Frawat & Jones, 1977); or (d) developmental delays (Roth, 1987).

Yet, since Labov’s (1972) landmark study of Black Vernacular English, we have become increasingly aware that all humans learn the discourse of their homes quite easily and that these discourses are each coherent, consistent, and equally viable systems of language. As Gee (1985) remarked,

There are some things that all human beings, barring rather severe handicaps, are good at. One of these is mastering a native language. . . . It is simply perverse to say that one native speaker has mastered the grammar better than another. Similarly, though this is less well recognized, all human beings are masters of making sense of experience and the world through narrative. . . . We are all given this gift in virtue of our humanness, though in some of us it may be atrophying under an avalanche of rational nonsense. (p. 27)

The “rational nonsense” to which Gee refers embraces the myth, so pervasive in our schools and in our society, that we can measure all human activities and then rank order people along a continuum. In schools, to make assumptions about students’ language competence, we compare it to clearly articulated, middle-class, Standard English discourse. Students like Anna, who become labeled as people with language/learning disabilities, are usually assessed via decontextualized, standardized tests, which do in fact reflect the expectations most teachers have about what kind of language is appropriate and acceptable in school (Edwards, 1989; Gee, 1990).

Michaels and her colleagues (Collins & Michaels, 1986; Michaels, 1981, 1985; Michaels & Collins, 1984), for example, have shown that teachers have rather narrow and rigid expectations for classroom discourse, including writing, and that they strive to “teach” their students to conform to those expectations—often unconsciously. Michaels (1991) argued that non-narrative discourse—description, explanation, and justification—are accorded a privileged status in school, even during sharing time (Show and Tell) in early elementary classrooms. Teachers, she says, “are looking for a certain kind of narrative account, with literate-like characteristics, closer to simple descriptive prose” (p. 309).

Because Anna had been labeled as having language/learning disabilities but was not severely impaired—and is in fact quite articulate—we decided to analyze the nature of her responses to our interview questions to determine how well they conformed to linguistic expectations for the structure of narratives deemed acceptable for use in school. Furthermore, we conducted a content analysis of the interviews with Anna and her peers to identify themes associated with the presentation of self (McAdams, 1993; Mishler, 1986).

Of course, in any interview, the questions and listening attitude of, as well as the power relations between, the interviewer and the participant affect the story that is told. The participants knew that we were university professors who taught teachers of both general and special education. We elicited the interviews by telling the students that we wanted them to tell us what they would like the teachers in our classes to know about them.

Anna

At the time of our interview, Anna was a tall, 13-year-old, White, middle class European American adolescent with dark red hair and a shy smile. Anna was labeled as having language disabilities at the age of 5. In Colorado a language disability is defined as a disorder that prevents the student from receiving reasonable educational benefit from general education. Language disability is related to functional communication or delayed language development (Colorado Code of Regulations 301-8, 1992). Anna’s
mother recounted to us that at the time Anna was diagnosed, she and her husband were told “not to bother” saving for a college education for Anna, because she would never have the requisite academic ability. They were instead advised to take their savings and “go on a vacation.” We refer to Anna as having language/learning disabilities because she was later diagnosed as having both disabilities.

Anna began first grade in a self-contained classroom for speech/language and communication disorders and was educated in resource rooms nearly exclusively through the fifth grade. In sixth grade, she was mainstreamed into a fifth/sixth-grade class for science and social studies. She and her family moved several times because of changes in her father’s place of employment (he was the manager of a supermarket chain). At the time she attended our summer special needs program, Anna had completed the sixth grade. Her tested reading level was 3 years below her grade placement level, and her math was 2 years below. Anna’s intelligence, however, was well within the normal range. In the paperwork the school personnel forwarded to the summer program, they indicated that Anna needed help with reading, math, and her low self-concept. Her school report also noted that Anna had difficulty with written language skills, particularly spelling.

During her interview and the subsequent discussions, Anna told a number of disturbing stories about her school-related experiences. Through Anna’s pain, however, there emerged a dignity and determination that impressed her peers as well as us. It was because of our respect for her that we asked for, and were granted, permission by Anna and her family to use her real name.

Other Participants

Five other student volunteers (three boys and two girls) in Grades 6 and 7 participated. All of the students had applied for the summer program, but because of high demand, only Anna and Lisa could be accommodated. All of the students were diagnosed as having severe difficulties related to listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, and/or mathematical abilities (Morris et al., 1994; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1987).

The students had all received special education services in public school settings and were designated as having perceptual or communicative disorders, the terminology used in the state of Colorado to describe language/learning disabilities. These disorders are described as being present in the psychological processes that affect language learning and are evidenced by (a) a significant discrepancy between estimated intellectual potential, usually based on the results of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised (Wechsler, 1974) or the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery (Woodcock, 1977) and actual levels of performance, or (b) language or cognitive processing that results in impaired achievement in reading, written language expression, and the comprehension, application, and retention of math concepts (Colorado Code of Regulations 301-8, 1992).

During the discussions, when the students were working on their collaborative essays, Lisa, a middle class Chicana, and Sally, a middle class European American, were very attentive to what the others in the group had to say, but contributed little. Lisa, age 14, who had long, beautiful, dark hair, would often lean down and literally hide behind her hair during the discussions. Sally, age 13, sat, resolute, her head filled with ideas she chose not to share, unless we asked her specifically to contribute.

Pedro, one of two 13-year-old, working-class, Hispanic American boys, was also very reticent, especially when talking about school. But he became animated when recounting adventures with his family and meeting his friends at the local shopping mall. Fernando, age 13, a seemingly jovial, articulate, and outgoing youngster, repeatedly described incidents at school when he was ridiculed for being in special education. He made it clear that as a “special ed kid” you had to learn to stand up for yourself. His greatest disappointments involved teachers and students who had treated him unfairly. Wayne, a 14-year-old, middle class European American, appeared to be very thoughtful. He also spoke with some displeasure about school, but his most profound messages were found in the drawings he made of his classroom experiences, one of which is presented later. We are using his real name with his and his family’s permission in order to give him credit for his expressive artistic talent.

Interviews and the Essay

In the summer of 1992, we invited these 6 young adolescents to tell us what being called learning disabled meant to them and to write a collaborative essay to help teachers better understand all students with learning disabilities. The second author, who had met 2 of these students previously, conducted the individual videotaped interviews, 1 student a day over a 6-day period. She asked questions similar to those that are interspersed in Anna’s interview. Our intention was to make the students as comfortable as possible and to make the interviews as fluid as possible, so the questions were not always asked in the same way or in the same order. These narrative interviews constituted our first data source. For their analysis, we followed the successive steps of the narrative inquiry process described by Mishler (1990): interviews with a small, varied group... repeated listenings to taped interviews and readings of transcripts, discovery of parallel trajectories in... histories, development and refinement of a model... selection of a respondent as a representative case, and specification...
of [her] narrative for detailed analysis and interpretation. (p. 427)

The first author (although both of us were present) led the discussions (also videotaped) through which the essay was created. The students worked together 2 hours a day for 4 days. The first day they were asked to brainstorm ideas they would like to see included in the essay. These were recorded on a board and then transcribed into a typed list, a copy of which was made available to each student during the second meeting. The students organized the list of items into categories by selecting the most important ideas. Nominations were listed on the board. After the students finished listing the “most important ideas," they were asked to determine under which of those ideas each of the remaining items on the list would be included. There were discussions about their earlier selections, and some of the most important ideas were combined, some eliminated, new items added. In the end, 16 categories were outlined into main ideas and supporting details. On the third day, the students were asked to discuss their categories of ideas and to rank order them: Which were most important to include in an essay to be shared with teachers? The top categories were then fleshed out into paragraphs: Students suggested sentences; others made recommendations for their revision or elimination. The order of the sentences was discussed and sometimes reorganized. When the students were satisfied with one category/paragraph, they went on to another. On the fourth day, the students reviewed their work for clarity and mechanical accuracy. Ideas were once again discussed, important ideas that had been previously left out were added, and a few words and sentences were deleted.

The essay was typed and distributed to students on the fifth day, when we met for a pizza party. The essay provided us with a second data source, the discussion through which the essay was constructed, a third, and Wayne’s cartoon, a fourth.

Analysis of Anna’s Transcript

We used a linguistic approach (Gee, 1985, 1986, 1989, 1991) for the analysis of Anna’s interview—a series of short narratives that, taken together, show how she uses stories to make sense of her experience as a person labeled learning disabled. We chose this means of presentation because, as Gee, Michaels, and O’Connor (1992) noted, cultural and linguistic strengths are more easily recognized from the idealized, formatted version.

Anna’s protocol is a sample of her discourse as she takes on the role of student in a rather formal interaction—a videotaped interview—with a woman she knows to be a teacher. Gee et al. (1992) noted that dialogue reflects “expectations about the roles participants will play and the characteristic ways in which people playing these roles are expected to act, interact, and appear to believe, value, and think” (p. 234). Because Anna is talking with a teacher in such a formal setting (a university classroom), the language she uses in this interview approximates the discourse patterns she uses in school (see Gee, 1989).

How It Feels to Be Called Learning Disabled

The opening couplet of the text presented in Table 1 summarizes the feelings that Anna illustrates in her subsequent story. She is angry and frustrated about being “in there.” By responding with the deictic term in there, rather than the term we used to ask the question, learning disabled, Anna distances herself from the label. Learning disabilities is a place, a distant place, the place she goes in school, and not a personal characteristic.

Anna frames her story by including an abstract (Labov, 1972) that both provides its essential point, “We are isolated from the regular sixth graders," and orients the listener to the context—the setting (sixth grade), time (last year), and characters (regular kids). The source of her anger and frustration is the “regular kids," including students who, last year, were “in there," who had problems much like her own but who now are regular sixth graders. Lest we think that these students are her friends, she is quick to note that they did not all get along. She attributes her isolation to the fact that whereas other sixth graders are in the regular class for a full day every day, “they go there only for science or social studies (see Note).

Stanza 3 is a clear example of a structure that Anna repeats again and again throughout her interview—parallelism between lines and groups of lines (see also lines 1–2 and 3–4). She begins with a verb, saying, “And they’re like” (an expression typical of the current adolescent vernacular), then follows with a quotation, in this case, the sixth graders’ question that serves as the initiating event in her story, “Why aren’t you in here?” In line 8, she repeats that question in paraphrase. In line 9, she again quotes the sixth graders, but this time with a declarative sentence that indicates that the previous questions have been rhetorical. The sixth graders know why she is not in there—again, a distancing, as she prepares to follow with an expansion (increasing in loudness and rapidity) in which the sixth graders accuse her of being retarded. The overall structure of the stanza, then, takes a semantic aabb form.

Anna’s response in this minidrama occurs in Stanza 4, which has a structure very similar to that of the previous stanza. She begins the first and third lines with a syntactic parallelism: “And it’s like” and “And they’re like.” In the first couplet, she loudly and in staccato asserts “I’m not in there because I’m retarded” and then explains, “I’m special ed.” The second couplet takes exactly the same form—an assertion, “No, you don’t know where I’m at,” followed by the explanation, “You can’t do stuff like us.”

Stanza 5 serves an evaluation function (Labov, 1972); that is, Anna tells us why she is telling the story. What is so out of the ordinary? She has to sit by herself. She is isolated. She could
TABLE 1
Idealized Realization of Anna’s First Story: What It Is Like to Be Learning Disabled

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What’s it like to be called learning disabled?</th>
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**Stanza 1: Feeling Abstract**
1. I usually feel mad.
2. Sometimes I feel frustrated, because I’m in there.

**Stanza 2: Story Abstract and Orientation**
3. There are regular kids that were in there last year that had almost the same problems.
4. But, we all did not get along.
5. Because other sixth graders are in the regular class.
6. And we go there only for science or social studies.

**Stanza 3: Challenge: You’re Retarded**
7. And they’re like, “Why aren’t you in here?”
8. “Like why aren’t you?”
9. “We know why you’re not in there.
10. “You’re not in there because you’re retarded.”

**Stanza 4: Defense and Rebuff**
11. And it’s like, “I’m not in there because I’m retarded.
12. “I’m special ed.”
13. And they’re like, “No, you don’t know where I’m at.
14. “You can’t do stuff like us.”

**Stanza 5: Evaluation**
15. And I couldn’t even sit at their desks with them.
16. I couldn’t even share a table.
17. I always had to be by myself at a different table when I had science or something.
18. And I was pretty sad.

**Stanza 6: Episode Orientation**
19. And then Mickey [a general education teacher] said, “I need somebody to help Anna.”

**Stanza 7: Second Challenge: They Thought I Could Do It**
20. They helped me, but they didn’t really want to help me.
21. Because they thought, “Oh, come on, dummy!”
22. (They thought too that I could do this.)
23. They thought, “Yeah, you can do this.
24. “You’re a regular sixth-grade kid.”

**Stanza 8: Second Defense**
25. It’s like, “No, I’m special ed.
26. “I can’t do this.”

**Stanza 9: Coda**
27. So I get along with it sometimes.
28. And it’s pretty hard.

not even sit among the sixth graders at their desks, or share a table. Lines 15 and 16 have the same parallel form as the couplets in the previous stanza. In line 17, Anna emphasizes the pain associated with this outcome by repeating again, “I always had to be by myself at a different table when I had science or something.” In line 18, she expresses her internal response to this state of affairs: “And I was pretty sad.” In this expression, she reiterates the negative feelings with which she opened her response but does not bring us back to the present tense, because she is not finished with her story. There is more to tell.

A new and contrasting episode begins in Stanza 6. The teacher, Mickey, asks the sixth-grade students to help Anna. As she notes in Stanza 7, line 20, they did help her, but they did not want to. Line 22 is an evaluation, which interrupts the flow of the narrative. Anna is making certain that the listener understands why she is quoting her classmates. This time the problem is not that they think she is retarded—on the contrary: These students make the mistake of thinking that Anna is like them, a regular sixth-grade kid. Again, we see the extension of the first line (20) of the couplet in the second (21): “They didn’t want to help. Because they thought, ‘Oh, come on, dummy’. . . . They thought (line 23), ‘Yeah, you can do this’ ” because (line 24) “You’re a regular sixth-grade kid.” The lines in which the quotations occur are said both more loudly and more rapidly than the lines surrounding them or the evaluation (line 22) inserted between them.

The story ends in Stanza 8 with Anna’s asserting once again that she is “special ed” and cannot do what they expect of her. Anna’s solution to these dilemmas, presented in the Coda (lines 27 and 28), is to “get along with it sometimes,” but at great personal cost, which explains the feelings of anger and frustration she addressed in her opening couplet.

Anna’s interview (see also the sections reported in other tables) stands midway between the oral tradition and the type of decontextualized, essayist style of narrative expected in school. Michaels (cited in Gee et al., 1992) reported that her data from the early elementary sharing-time studies indicated that even in the primary grades, teachers were looking for a decontextualized account centering on a single topic, whereby (1) objects were named and described, even when in
plain sight; (2) talk was to be explicitly grounded temporally and spatially; (3) minimal shared background or contextual knowledge was to be assumed between speaker and audience; and (4) thematic ties needed to be lexicalized if topic shifts were to be seen as motivated and relevant. (p. 255)

And, in her study of the teaching of composition writing in a sixth-grade classroom, Michaels (1991) reported that the teacher typically edited personal, concrete anecdotes out, particularly in the beginning of the school year, when she was trying to establish her expectations.

Anna’s story in Table 1 is more like a play than a decontextualized prose description. She first sets the tone and sketches out the cast of characters. When she plays the roles of the sixth graders in her dialogues, she assumes a derisive tone of voice that is more high-pitched than her personal voice; her speech also becomes louder and more rapid. The questions she raises are rhetorical; they are there for their dramatic effect and they are grounded neither spatially nor temporally (she refers to some general group of sixth graders in some unspecified sixth-grade class). In her abstract, she mentions the students who had the same problems as she did last year, but one gets the sense from her story that she is presenting a dramatized description of life, rather than a specific event. The second episode is juxtaposed, rather than lexically connected, although she does imply a shift of scene in line 19, with her use of “And then Mickey said, ‘I need somebody to help Anna.’ ” This second episode does not follow the first in time. It simply is another vignette that dramatizes a contrasting, although still troublesome, misunderstanding that her classmates (this time, the ones in Mickey’s class) have about her problem. Again, she adopts a mocking, rhythmic, and emphatic prosodic pattern, except for her external evaluation and the final couplet. And, again, the dramatization is of business as usual.

On the other hand, in keeping with school-based expectations, Anna’s narrative is topic centered. She relates two contrasting reactions to her disability and her response to them—an unmistakable insistence that she is neither retarded nor a regular kid who learns as easily as the others. Instead, she is “special ed.” And although the situation saddens her and is “pretty hard,” she manages to “get along with it.” The semantic, and occasionally syntactic, parallelism in her aabb stanza is reminiscent of, although not as sophisticated as, the narrative of Sandy, an 11-year-old, White, middle class girl whom Gee (1989) described as an example of someone using a “language style highly compatible with school-based values in regard to the use of language in speech and writing” (p. 287). Sandy’s story, however, is a series of episodes consecutively ordered in time and does not rely on dramatization like Anna’s oral tradition does. In Anna’s narrative, the dialogue carries the story. In Sandy’s narrative the prose description carries the story and the dialogue embellishes it.

In summary, in this narrative (as well as in the others presented in this article), Anna has communicated both effectively and forcefully. The vast majority of her stanzas are four lines in length, as is also typical of English speakers. The narrative has a clearly defined overall form—a description of the problem, followed by two vignettes that illustrate it, and a return to the feelings articulated in the opening. The text has structure and coherence.

When compared to school-based expectations for language use, however, Anna’s narrative is seen as lacking. It does not conform to the narrow expectations that govern teachers’ instructional interventions and assessments of competence. It is far too personal and dramatic. Michaels (1991) noted an inherent catch-22 for students like Anna:

These children whose oral style and narrative schemata were at variance with the teacher’s were not able to establish the kind of engagement and cooperation with the teacher that seemed to be a prerequisite for successful collaboration and practice. . . . These results suggest a kind of Catch-22 for these children. You have got to start out having elements of a topic-centered narrative schema if you are going to get practice in developing it. If not, the narrative schema you have will be devalued, and you are unlikely to receive help in producing narratives of any sort—topic-centered or other wise. It is for this reason that I see the process as one of dismantling narrative abilities. (p. 326)

Although Anna’s narrative is topic centered, it is still sufficiently different from school expectations to be devalued. But, because it is in fact well structured and coherent, we must ask whether Anna’s oral style has been cast (in light of the measurement myth) as deficient when in fact it is adequate language that is simply different from the narrow band of styles that are valued and accepted in schools.

Content Themes

Our second purpose in this study was to identify the themes associated with these students’ presentation and understanding of the selves that they construct through the stories they tell. Interviews of students with learning disabilities have traditionally been driven by a deficit model in which the questions address the investigators’ purposes, such as planning programs, conducting assessments, and so forth (Thiessen, 1987). Few investigators have interviewed students with disabilities in order to hear from them, to give them voice. These students are the forgotten element in the educational equation. Few sources have acknowledged the importance of a student’s previous knowledge and experience in the active construction of knowledge (Gallagher & Reid, 1983; Poplin, 1984). Even fewer recognize the roles they play in the social construction of their selves (Polkinghorne, 1991).
Students are active participants in the interpretation of themselves and their world, not mere reactors (Ferguson, Ferguson, & Taylor, 1992). In the interviews and discussions we engaged in with Anna and the other students, several themes about being learning disabled emerged. The students unanimously reported feeling isolated, victimized, and betrayed. A second theme related to the misunderstanding and devaluing they experienced in school. Finally, it is not possible to interpret the negative comments we heard as unpleasantness or mild distress. These students repeatedly reported feeling what is more accurately labeled as oppression, in its political sense.

**Isolation, Victimization, and Betrayal**

Like her peers, Anna expressed anger and frustration at being isolated from her classmates by being put in a different physical space when she was staffed into a special education classroom (see Table 1). During the discussions and interviews, all of the students, but especially Anna, Lisa, and Fernando, indicated that it was hurtful when other students, whom they hardly knew, misunderstood their problems: “People call us retarded ... or tell lies about you [and] it makes you feel bad. We get mad” (see Table 3). For Anna, being in special education might have meant being “disabled
TABLE 3
The Students’ Collaborative Essay

Being Learning Disabled: Sally, Anna, Pedro, Fernando, Lisa, and Wayne

We don’t like it when people call us retarded. When people call you names or tell lies about you it makes you feel bad. We get mad.

It’s fun to meet new friends, except the first day you meet them you are pretty shy. It’s fun to learn new things. Teachers care about us. Some teachers know how we feel.

When you are learning disabled, you feel different because you are not with the same teachers as the regular students. You can’t goof off. Some kids are really nice to you. Some kids are mean. They make fun of us because we are in special education.

Some parents talk to you about school and that helps a lot. But sometimes it doesn’t help. When some parents talk to you about school, it’s usually, “Do better!” But we are trying already to do our best. It’s good when your parents know how you feel. Sometimes parents love you too much and do your work for you instead of letting you do it yourself. Most brothers and sisters don’t understand, but some do, because they went through the same thing.

School is boring. Teachers should go faster because when they go slow, we fall asleep or we can’t get our work done. Sometimes they talk too fast and talk too much. They repeat too much and that’s another thing that stops us from doing our work. When you come from another class and they say something, they won’t repeat it. They say, “If you weren’t here, that’s too bad.” To make school more exciting there should be more teacher demonstrations and more people talking, more experiments and a little less reading and writing. Teachers should show you how to do things, because you don’t get it only from words. Teachers should lighten up too and let us party.

School should be shorter. Classes start too early and last too long. School would be better if they had better lunches. There should be more free time and more choice time so you could do more things. Use your talents whenever you can.

This is what it’s like to be learning disabled.

TABLE 4
Idealized Realization of Anna’s Story About Her Relationship with Her Brother

Do you have brothers and sisters?
I have one brother.

How is he about you being in the LD program?

Stanza 15: Orientation
58. Well, he was in fourth grade last year.
59. He told a lot of kids that I wasn’t special ed.
60. And that I did not go, and they noticed that I did not go, to that school either.
61. (Because I was in special ed, I had to go to a different school.)

Stanza 16: Peer Challenge
62. And sometimes, I had a half day, like Valentine’s Day or some other holiday, and they didn’t.
63. My mom was a room mother for them.
64. So I had to go with her to watch my little sister.
65. So my mom took both of us.
66. And like a few of these kids came up, “Why don’t you go to this school?”

Stanza 17: Betrayal
67. And my brother goes, “Yeah, she doesn’t even know times.”
68. Then he goes like, “Yeah, what’s this plus this times this?”
69. And I’m like, “I don’t know.”
70. And then his friends like, “Yeah, yeah.”

Stanza 18: Cods
71. And sometimes I just don’t get along with them at all.
even know her times. What’s this plus this times this?""). The incident represented a childish but cruel test that Anna failed to pass and that galvanized for the students in her brother’s class her image of being unacceptable.

**Being Misunderstood and Unappreciated**

Not only did the students labeled learning disabled object to being called retarded, but they were also, as Anna’s interview indicates, upset with teachers and students who did not recognize that they could not perform certain tasks as well as their general education peers. It seems that they were frequently being put into niches in which they did not fit. Even their parents sometimes seemed insensitive to their problems. Some would admonish the students to “Do better!” But they were not capable of doing better; they were “trying already to do our best” (see Table 3). At other times, parents “love you too much and do your work for you instead of letting you do it for yourself” (see Table 3). All of the students told us they felt misunderstood.

As a group, the students complained that school was boring. The repetitive drills that teachers said were helpful, the students found boring. They expressed a desire to do more hands-on activities and to have more teacher demonstrations. They complained that teachers used only one avenue of instruction: talking. They wanted more opportunity to use the skills and talents they had, and less reading and writing. We asked about this, because certainly reading and writing are what schooling is about. Although the essay seems somewhat cavalier, the students were really asking for balance. “Use your talents whenever you can,” is descriptive of their perception that their gifts go unrecognized and unappreciated, because of the limited ways students are allowed to learn and show their knowledge in classrooms.

Although so many of their comments are negative, these are not hostile, aggressive students. They are instead students who feel the pain of being undervalued and who thrive on whatever attention they can command. The little story Anna tells in Table 5 is an example. The best experience she had ever had in school was to receive a note of thanks from her art teacher.

**Oppression**

Oppression by teachers, peers, parents, and siblings and the rigidity of the school structure was another common theme. The students had few choices. They had been found wanting by adults, are tested and staffed by adults, and are instructed by adults. Seldom do they have any input into what happens to them. They want to be like everybody else. They want to spend more time in general education classrooms to get to know their general education peers, instead of being physically set aside.

Furthermore, not once in the interviews or during the discussions did any of the students, including Anna, ever describe themselves as learning disabled. In the essay, however, they did use the term, probably because we gave them the essay title. The label itself, like most everything else in their school lives, was imposed by the school because, as the students understood it, they were “having trouble,” or “getting bad grades.” Most of the students did not have any clear recollection of why they had been labeled in the first place. Wayne commented that “it was just too far off to remember.”

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**TABLE 5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Best School Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Uh huh. What’s been the best experience that you ever had in school? Can you think of a time that was really a neat experience for you?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well, last year, for sixth grade, I got this little thing. (See, we always had lunch time art. You come in after lunch, which you eat. She used to have kids eat in there and do work plus, but it got too messy with food going around. And so the kids eat and then go in there and did stuff.) We did this little visual. We made a little rain forest. I wasn’t there “cause I thought, “I’m not going to get anything.” (One kid, a boy that was in special ed., went.) Well, I got something from my art teacher for helping. A little piece of paper that says, “Thanks for helping.” I thought that was a really great thing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A school experience that was not fun</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Can you think of a time that was not fun?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I have science, I sometimes need help. Because the last thing we did for science, because it was going to be summer, you’re supposed to make a little placemat. But we had to read out of the dictionary to see what it was to put the names down. And I had trouble with that. I couldn’t do it like everybody else. One thing that’s hard for me is when I’m in regular class. And we’re supposed to read this piece of paper. (two pages or a story or something). I’m halfway on the first page and they’re done. And it makes me pretty mad, because I can’t do the reading as fast.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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In Wayne’s cartoon (see Figure 1), the teacher is represented as a menacing half-man, half-gorilla with tattoo and cigar, brandishing a spiked bludgeon. On the board is written an impossible assignment demanding that students write an essay with over 31,000 words, “due today.” Perhaps the most disturbing part of the picture is the portrayal of the students as three cowering, bewildered dogs. This entire scene of academic “torture” is being recorded on a video camera similar to those used for security systems. The “students” appear to be incarcerated, or, at the very least, “on display.” The message is clear: Here there is oppression, and students have no voice.

**The Positive Side**

The students all agreed that they genuinely enjoyed learning. In their essay they acknowledge that “it’s fun to learn new things.” In their discussion they talked about how not learning was not fun and how being isolated, punished, or derided for not learning was cruel. They thought that both their parents and their teachers were generally caring and concerned, but that siblings, unless they had been through the same kinds of experiences, were likely to be insensitive. Finally, they were well aware that they were labeled as the result of a process intended to help them. They were grateful for the help they received and were painfully aware that they needed it.

In summary, stories we heard from these students in their interviews and during the group essay writing suggested that they felt isolated, victimized, devalued, and oppressed. They realized that what was done to them was “for their own good,” but they would have liked to have had the help without the label and without the isolation.

**Conclusion**

In this article we have examined how Anna and her peers use narrative to
make sense of their personal experience: When students like Anna organize their life events into stories with temporal and plausible causal relations, what kind of answers do they get to the question, “Who am I?” Unfortunately, the answer we have gotten from listening to Anna and her peers is something like, “I am a person who is sometimes and in some ways unacceptable as a friend and classmate, as a brother or sister, and as a son or daughter. I am not retarded, but neither am I as able as most of my peers. I am not clear, however, about what my problems are. I am a person who, because of difficulties in school, has little control over my life. I have few choices and little voice in the decisions that affect me. I find life rather hard and people rather intimidating, but I get along with it as best I can.”

As we indicated in the opening of this article, it is ironic that in a field that was avowedly designed to improve the quality of life for persons with disabilities, we should have come so late to valuing their perspectives. We have constructed a system of intervention in our schools that addresses what we think are their best interests, but we have chosen not to confront the personal damage that this system can inflict on some students. The inclusion movement has begun to redress some of the problems Anna and her peers have raised, especially with respect to social isolation and self-advocacy, but inclusion in its current form does not go far enough.

So long as we continue with our system of “rational nonsense”—with rigid, age-related curriculum demands that are insensitive to natural variations in students’ prior experience, including narrative traditions; with measurements that rank order people (and implicitly rank value them) along dimensions that are not inherently hierarchical (such as language usage); with a system of education that values only a narrow band of possible talents and intelligences, so that it privileges the children of the middle class while denying the political nature of schooling—we cannot avoid oppression of the students who do not fit the pigeonholes we create for them.

For we do, as a society, create many of these categories of disability. We must not lose sight of the fact that handicapping conditions are socially constructed (Foucault, 1965, 1978). Emotional disturbances have been defined by societal norms for behavior—norms that often work against the interests of women, children, and other marginalized populations. Mental retardation has been defined by societal norms for successful schooling: Its primary diagnosis relies on measuring decontextualized cognition against the institutionalized norms for successful schooling as they have been embodied in intelligence tests. Learning disabilities have been defined largely by age-related standards imposed by achievement expectations, when intelligence is not a contributing factor. The difficulty has been that we have reified these conditions, attributing them to students as if they were personal characteristics in the sense of the medical model. Perhaps unintentionally, we have used such labels as a means to justify the exclusion of some students from the system, rather than addressing the question of how to reform our entrenched bureaucratic educational system in ways that will answer their needs. We have paid lip service to the idea that “all children can learn,” while simultaneously limiting the potential of many students, including those we have discussed here, by the way we conduct business as usual in our schools.

Language is a pivotal dimension in this regard. Edwards (1989), Gee (1990), Michaels (1991), and others have shown how language is used for the purpose of domination. The quotation we used earlier, about the catch-22 phenomenon, is an example. Students whose home discourse patterns do not match the expectations of school-based language have problems learning to read and write that are not necessarily the direct result of the discourse mismatch, but rather of the way teachers respond to such students as linguistically deficient, deviant, or deprived (Mehan, 1984; Young, 1983). When the student’s abilities do not match the often implicit expectations of the teacher, the student’s abilities are devalued and, sometimes, in Michaels’ (1991) word, dismantled. Anna, for example, is a native speaker of English and a human being with narrative competence, albeit more closely related to the oral tradition. Why has she been isolated, unappreciated, and oppressed in school?

What we can learn from narrative inquiries like the one presented here is that there are powerful inequities in our system that disempower the students we mean to serve. As special educators, we need to invite the voices of our students, like Anna and her peers, to negotiate with ours, the voices of the supposed experts, to determine on a one-to-one basis how we can advocate for students like them and help them to advocate for themselves. How can we reform their particular situations so that they can better profit from instruction? How can we develop their talents and show appreciation for their humanity? They know how they experience school, and they can tell us. We need to learn to listen with an open, sensitive, and inquisitive mind and not just our rational judgment. Furthermore, we need to educate ourselves about how our interventions, however well intentioned, produce negative outcomes. We must empower our students, because the answer to the question “Who am I?” leads to decisions about “who I can become.”

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NOTE
It is clear that Anna spends most of her day in a resource room, although she never says so. Her focus throughout the interview is on her painful isolation from the students in the general sixth-grade (actually a fifth/sixth combination) classroom. Even when she is asked specifically about her relationships with students who are also called learning disabled, she glidly mentions that it is "pretty good" to be with them and then shifts immediately to talking about her loneliness. We believe that there are at least two possible reasons for this emphasis on her isolation. First, it is a serious problem for Anna, one that she seems unable to solve. The second reason may be that we tell stories only about those aspects of our lives that are not canonical (Bruner, 1990). We must have a reason to tell stories. They must be about what is out of the ordinary. As storytellers, we do not want to risk having the listener responding with, "So what?"

REFERENCES


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