

Exploring Early School Recollections of Adults with Disabilities



Authors

Emily Frake, MA
Emily Rourke, OTR/L
Molly Williams, ACSW

Affiliations

California Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (CA-LEND)

USC Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD)/Children's Hospital Los Angeles

Faculty: Nancy Hunt, PhD and Maria Marquez

1 Abstract

Currently, much of the research on school perceptions for students with disabilities gathers insight from parents/caregivers and teachers rather than the individuals with disabilities (e.g. Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). In this preliminary exploratory quality improvement study, we aimed to take a person-centered approach and amplify the voices of adults with disabilities by asking them about their school experiences. Using semi-structured interviews, we spoke with 11 adults, identifying as having a disability, about their school experiences from grades K-12. Overall, we found that our participants had incredibly diverse school experiences in the areas of academics, social relationships, (self-) advocacy, and disability identity or self-perception.

2 Participants



GENDER ETHNICITY

8 Female 5 Asian
3 Male 3 Hispanic
3 White

DIAGNOSES

autism, ADHD, cerebral palsy, narcolepsy, dyslexia, gene condition, other mental health conditions

3 Methodology

- Semi-structured exploratory Zoom interviews performed by three scholars
- 30 - 60 minutes each
- Open-ended questions designed to help participants recollect their school experiences

4 Findings

- **Diverse experiences** in both academic and social contexts
- Diverse experiences with **disability advocacy** e.g., self-advocacy, parental advocacy, and no advocacy.
- **Negative views of disability** while in school impacting **childhood self-esteem**

Advocacy



K. on self-advocacy

"I really had to advocate for myself to go find a therapist or a psychologist to get diagnosed."

A. on parent advocacy

"My mom always listened and always fought for us."

J. on lacking advocates

"It was very much like, 'We don't need to worry about [me]. We need to worry about your sister.'"

Low Self-Esteem



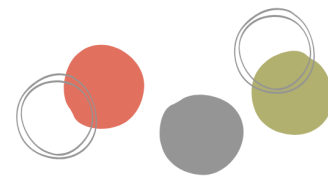
M. on not feeling smart

"I ... remember being like, I don't feel very smart, and I don't feel like the things that are being like given to me ... are helping."

K. on academic self-perception

"Ever since I remember, I did not see myself as good at school ... I wasn't disruptive or I could get along with people, but, like, academically, I was not good."

Diverse Experiences



D. on high school

"I had (school name) for school... And it was one of the worst poor experiences of all time."

M. on liking school

"Like school was still enjoyable. I definitely remember always being very excited on the bus. Like to go to school like I I was like like, had butterflies usually like.. I was like, 'Oh, I can't wait to go to school.'"

5 Limitations

It is impossible to generalize the school experiences of students with disabilities with our small sample and range of disabilities. While some of our participants were able to "pass" as neurotypical or non-disabled, others were visibly disabled throughout their entire school experience. To take our findings from the eleven interviews and generalize them across the disability community, would be to do a huge disservice to the complexity and nuance of each of the experiences of disabled students.

Our sample of participants could have been more diverse in a number of ways. A majority of our participants were female-identifying. It is possible that male participants may have highlighted other experiences that were not pervasive with our current sample, such as peer teasing or bullying.

References

- Tucker, V., & Schwartz, I. (2013). Parents' perspectives of collaboration with school professionals: Barriers and facilitators to successful partnerships in planning for students with ASD. *School Mental Health, 5*, 3-14.
- Falkmer, M., Anderson, K., Joosten, A., & Falkmer, T. (2015). Parents' perspectives on inclusive schools for children with autism spectrum conditions. *International journal of disability, development and education, 62*(1), 1-23.
- Rodriguez, R. J., Blatz, E. T., & Elbaum, B. (2014). Parents' views of schools' involvement efforts. *Exceptional Children, 81*(1), 79-95.