



## Learning to read: learning disabled post-secondary students talk back to special education

Sheena Brown

To cite this article: Sheena Brown (2009) Learning to read: learning disabled post-secondary students talk back to special education, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22:1, 85-98, DOI: [10.1080/09518390802581943](https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390802581943)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390802581943>



Published online: 04 Feb 2009.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 890



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

## **Learning to read: learning disabled post-secondary students talk back to special education**

Sheena Brown\*

*Independent Scholar, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada*

*(Received 20 October 2008; final version received 27 October 2008)*

This article reveals the findings of a participatory ethnography with post-secondary students enrolled in a large West Coast University in British Columbia who had previously been identified as 'learning disabled' and thus, the 'recipients' of special educational policy interventions. Instead of starting from the official meanings of the special education policy discourses, this study puts front and centre the meanings and experiences of the students themselves. It uncovers the performative work the students engage as they negotiate the contradictory ideologies of meritocracy and equal opportunity while living with the label and realities of various 'learning disabilities'. The students' discourses are read in relation to and against the dominant common-sense ideologies of special education. The study takes into account the students readings in light of their positionalities as racialized, classed, gendered, in addition to living with the label of learning disability. Contrary to the claim that meritocracy and equal opportunity are merely superimposed myths internalized by the students, the students' understandings demonstrate that both ideologies involve their active agency to claim 'abilities' and 'normalcy' as counter-hegemonic moments in relation to the larger special education and educational discourses that represent their learning disabilities as 'deficient'. The implications of this study shed light on how the discourses of students with learning disabilities may be used to read in transformative ways the schooling practices, policies and pedagogies. 'Normal' is not so stable and taken for granted after all. 'Ability' is as much a claim to agency and capacity for learning disabled students as it is for the non-disabled.

**Keywords:** ethnography; learning disabled; special education

This project hinges on investigating the meanings enrolled university students, who had previously been identified with a learning disability, might place upon their prior and current schooling experiences. The central question this study asks is do those students (previously targeted through schooling interventions designed to help them achieve scholastic success and now pursuing post-secondary studies) see themselves as the 'success stories' of such policies? A series of sub-questions will help guide how these students might make meaning of their experiences: (1) How may their answers also reflect their positionality as gendered, classed, racialized and sexualitized social actors? (2) How may learning disabilities be used as a way to read schooling ideology?

---

\*Email: [shelbro@shaw.ca](mailto:shelbro@shaw.ca)

When talking about and defining disability, two forms of thought swings towards a biological or social model understanding. As a biological condition, disability is something that makes its appearance on/within the body. The body is the site of trouble; a spine as slippery as syntax, an arm that curves away from the norm. A social model argues that the disability makes a social appearance – it is present in our everyday interactions, present in how we make meaning of the world and bodies in which we live. In particular, as disability scholars argue, '[t]he "problem" is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the "problem" of the disabled person' (Davis 1995, 24).

Drawing from Susan Wendell's interpretation of the United Nations definition that recognizes a difference between impairment as bodily and disability as social, while not problem-free, it is a definition that provides flexibility in its recognition of normalcy as dependent upon space and time (1996, 13–22). Disability is not an independent 'truth' but one which shifts and slides. Likewise learning disabilities have been chosen because they sit within this matrix. Intimately connected to schooling curriculum, practices and pedagogy, learning disabilities diagnosis relies heavily upon performative measures of skill sets constituted as critically important in classroom settings. Yet as the *Special Education Services: A Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines* put forth by the province of British Columbia's Ministry of Education states, '[l]earning disabilities are life-long [and] are due to genetic and or/neurological factors or injury that alters brain function in a manner that affects one or more processes related to learning' (2006, 46).

In joining the dialogue on this topic, my primary concern centred upon how to represent and include people who have previously been measured by academic standards as 'deficient' through the application academic standards determining 'good' research – did I risk reproducing what I wanted to avoid? I was torn between knowing that research has been used to silence and delegitimize the voices of people who often become objectified, and believing research could be used as a tool to propel those voices often absent from policy-making into conversation with those policy-makers. I felt uncomfortable about going into the 'field' as an 'expert' yet also understood that boycotting the issues would be an easy cop-out that would not resolve anything. Those power dynamics determining who speaks and who doesn't, who is present and who is absent from the canon, would not take notice if I never opened my mouth. Speaking for others, as Linda Alcoff (1991) reminds me, does not excuse me from dealing with power nor does it excuse me from the responsibilities of how I decide to use that power. It is how we negotiate these processes that ultimately matter, not only to our lives as researchers, but also the lives of research participants.

For these purposes, I chose to conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews that asked each participant questions about how they defined themselves, their schooling experiences and their disability. Guided, but not rigidly determined, allowing the interests of the researcher to act as the catalyst for conversation, semi-structured interviewing allows for the opportunity for active collaboration in which participants are able to co-identify major themes and concerns, problematizing the emergence of a single authoritative narrative determined by specific objectives. This technique would offer the greatest amount of flexibility in that participants could ask questions back, openly challenge my questions and clarify meanings. For me, it meant I could approach each participant on a level foothold as a person with similar experiences and work towards the findings together. This also meant that I had to pay serious attention

to the idea of participation and subjectivity. While subjectivity might suggest inclusion in the form of direct inclusion of voice, I wanted collaborative participation about how these words were to be used and interpreted.

All the participants, with the exception of Lilly, chose to have me assign a pseudonym although they were aware they could choose their own. A large post-secondary institution located on the Canadian west coast was chosen as the research site. The site has been made anonymous to protect the anonymity of the participants, reducing the likelihood that the participants could be identified by location. All participants were recruited voluntarily through poster advertisements placed in common areas on a campus and data was collected during the spring and fall of 2007.

Although I consider it an important ethical and theoretical choice to include the voices of the participants, I am also aware that I am crafting how they appear on the page, weaving their words alongside those themes which I feel are central. Ultimately this work is reflexive of my authority and authorship. I am also aware of the criticisms these attempts have posed as fancy linguistic footwork (Kirsch 1999) that do little to upset the ways in which research is presented. For this reason, I chose to indicate to the reader where I've pulled my quotes from each participant's interview, to deliberately demonstrate that the flow I'm creating on the page did not necessarily follow in the interview, calling attention to the performative aspects of scholarship which can become submerged.

### **A read-along series: reading special education alongside class, gender and ethnicity**

The participants who graciously and generously volunteered their time and shared their thoughts, without which this work would not be possible, consisted of three women and one man, ranging in age from early 20s to mid-60s. Two were graduate students, Sandra (mid-60s) and Lilly (23). The other had just completed all requirements for a programme certificate and was looking forward to a spring graduation (Sasha, mid-50s), while the other was an undergraduate student (Michael, 23). Only one student identified herself as a 'minority woman'. Most described their family backgrounds as comfortable, happy and middle class although a single definition of what middle class meant to each participant varied:

- Michael: Oh. Well we're like ... well my dad opened a business when I was in grade ten and it's now grown to have one employee and they do okay. But umm all through elementary school and for a good chunk of high school, I'd say we were lower middle class kind of thing. Working family. My dad worked and didn't make that much money but we're happy. Yeah, so ummm, yeah you could say that. (Interview 1, 12)
- Lilly: ... I came from a pretty well off, didn't struggle. My dad drove a Ferrari and we went on trips around the world every year on a private yacht. (Interview 1, 3)

Both Sasha and Sandra do not make specific mention to their class backgrounds, but Sandra, now semi-retired, did have a long career as a remedial teacher instructing children and adults as well as English as a second language (ESL) students and does make mention of her previous experiences teaching in other countries. Sasha mentions her reliance on external funding to support herself through her studies.

It is interesting that none of the participants identified themselves as working class. Although there was a great deal of discrepancy between how participants defined

middle class, as Michael and Lilly's answers illustrate, the participants were aware of how class and disability related, interjecting their own analysis of why learning disabilities may or may not target students with class backgrounds dissimilar to themselves:

Lilly: That's one thing I was lucky my parents had enough money that they had the 4000 dollars in 1999 to buy a laptop and to get one at the school would have been a year later. I was lucky that my parents had enough money put away to afford something like that and to be able to afford the psych assessment in the first place. 'Cause again you can get one through the school but there is a wait list that takes several years. (Interview 1, 6)

Michael: [A]fter four years after your psycho-ed test, you don't get accommodations anymore unless you get another test done by a psychologist or whatnot. So I obviously can't afford that! Its 1800 dollars or something like that to get a test done [...] (Interview 1, 5)

So if you're eligible for student loans there's a grant available to you to get the psycho-ed analysis done so or get it discounted so you only a portion of it so, 'cause I'm not eligible for students loans I'm not eligible for this grant, so the whole burden of the 1800 dollars falls on my shoulders. (Interview 1, 6)

Undeniably because of the written performative nature of learning disabilities, diagnosis does not exist independently of often costly assessment testing. As the participants mention, although provisions exist to provide testing, these resources can be overwhelmed and can lead to delays placing an emphasis on parents to cover any funding shortfalls.

Yet rather than the critical analysis of special education I thought I'd uncover, I found instead the participants offering me an interpretation of a particularity cherished ideology in schooling as read their particular material and social identities. These students understood their school experiences, and hence their disability, through an understanding of meritocracy. Rather than being upset by the apparent contradiction between the notion of open inclusion and the barriers, such as class as they suggested, their understanding of meritocracy was woven into, part of and inseparable from the ways in which they understood themselves, their social world and their place in that world that included notions of normalcy, disability and schooling.

***Michael: 'Life's a struggle right?'***

At the time of this study, Michael was enrolled in his third year of undergraduate studies but had already spent six years at various post-secondary institutions. First attending community college, he completed a two-year business diploma, switched schools to attend another university and then switched again to pursue a specific programme specialization. Also working part-time, playing hockey and enduring a long commute from his family residence by transit to attend classes, the most pressing concern for Michael was his lack of access to accommodations and services at the post-secondary level.

Explaining that his last assessment testing had been done before his transition into high school to secure accommodations for this level of study, and then again before high school graduation, his testing was now more than four years old. In order to receive accommodations for post-secondary, Michael needed to submit documentation that could not be any older than four years. Although he was aware

of financial assistance offered to students who were eligible for student loans, and had previously been eligible, he had dropped several classes thereby not retaining the necessary course load to meet his funding level. Asked to pay back this now over-awarded amount, Michael was unable to pay off the full amount, disqualifying him from future funding and blocking off any grants available to offset the cost of providing current documentation.

However, as Michael is also an avid hockey player and has suffered several concussions, all of which have been documented, he has been able to receive limited accommodations in the form of a note-taker for his classes. Yet, the majority of his current dilemma stems from his need to obtain a second language requirement for graduation. Tested prior to high school, and officially diagnosed as dyslexic, his accommodations then included extending the test time to time and a half and the waiver of a second language. Without accommodations, Michael must complete second language credits to pursue his specialization.

When asked to define what he meant by a learning disability he responded:

Ummm, I think it's ... biological definitely. I don't think it's, umm, a disability per se, maybe not an accurate word. It's more about people who learn differently I guess. I dunno, but that's how I've thought of it. Ummm, because I know, even people will say that a learning disability means your stupid or whatever. I know my IQ is a lot higher than the average and it never really made any ... but I don't put any stock into that, but it just means you have to work harder at some things, ummm, some aspects of school. (Interview 1, 2)

Situated within a biological understanding of a personal flaw to be overcome by hard work, juxtapositioned against his need for accommodations to successfully complete his degree requirements he states:

... It strikes me as completely illogical, like we know learning disabilities don't go away, it's something you're going to have for the rest of your life and because a psycho-ed form is over four years old, you can't get accommodations, so it's kind of a problem. (Interview 1, 5)

Because my psycho-ed was over four years old, it was the only documentation that was relevant. Like I brought in the one from earlier and it was like, 'yeah we can see you have a learning disability'. I talked to the guy as was like, 'they don't go away!' Well obviously! (Interview 1, 8)

Taking on the idea of disability as biological and thereby are a fixed and indisputable set of attributes against the need to prove his disability seems to snag a contradiction: if disability is an obvious affliction, why the constant need to prove it? Isn't this meaning fixed, universal and totalizing? Even the Ministry of Education (*Special Education Services: A Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines* 2006, 46) recognizes and defines learning disabilities as life long. The need for evidence seems to suggest that the definitions are not as determinately anchored to a single polarity something Michael also acknowledges:

Like what if it comes back (the assessment tests) and it says Michael doesn't have a learning disability anymore? Like, like what if I do well on the test or something because a lot of IQ tests ... I do a lot of IQ tests for fun 'cause I like puzzles and stuff. Like I'm really good at writing IQ tests, so what if it came back and I don't have a learning disability? (Interview 2, 5)

At this juncture, I had assumed that Michael would begin a critical analysis of the assessment process, pulling apart its discursive attributes, its measurement within a narrow scope of tasks deemed scholastic. Yet, instead of beginning this torrent tango that twirls between biological and social models to define the ‘problem’, I found instead the more familiar tempo of staccato sounds that beat its message of sweat and success. For Michael, the issue was not one of defining himself in relation to a particular meaning of disability, but rather how that meaning of disability fit in relation to how he defined himself. Disability became part of the world he already knew, the intimate and yet mundane materiality of being located as a particular social agent with a particular position. For Michael, disability could not be separated from those things he already knew about himself, which were predominantly his gender and class identity. But these notions also related back to what he already knew about schooling, what he already knew about how schooling and success were equated, that meritocratic promise which was anything but mythology:

- SB: Well how did you feel about that label and the way it’s been taken up and used?
- Michael: Ummm, the learning disability label?
- SB: Yeah.
- Michael: Ummm, I love it. I accept it was part of who I am and I know I’ve got a different take on it cause I know a lot of people feel ashamed or they feel like they aren’t complete people or whatever. I say, look, I’ve had to work hard, probably harder than a lot of people in high school and college. It just makes me a better person and just makes me a harder worker.... (Interview 1, 13)
- Michael: [A]t the beginning people would kind of snicker or whatever. But this is the way I always deal with things: I kind of laugh, I mean what can I do? I can’t change anything. I could feel bad about it, but I got to cope and just go on. But they would laugh at me and I’d be well, go ahead guys. I get a bit of extra time on my test, enjoy the deadline! Whatever, I mean I would joke about it and go on about my way, cause what can I do? I have to take advantage of the accommodations that they give me, I can’t feel embarrassed. (Interview 1, 4)

His emphasis on constructing a tough and defensive ability to joke, his determination to work hard and success echo strongly the meritocratic promise of rewarding effort, but gender it masculine within in his own class background that also emphasizes and values hard work:

- Michael: I just look at – if it’s not hard it’s not worth doing. Life’s a struggle right? And when you do go, it just makes your goal that much sweeter I guess. (Interview 1, 16)

In this way, meritocracy articulates itself through those material and discursive elements which work in relation to what Michael already knows to be true. Instead of starting a new telling of the everyday which cuts against his positionality, he offers one in which he remains located. Yet, instead of being left powerless and voiceless by ‘truths’ that seems to strip agency, he takes them to task. By accepting a biological definition of his disability, he infuses it with messages of hard work, effort and definition that affirm his gender and class identity. He retains the ‘truth’ of objectivity, of progress, of science, of schooling and retains his agency.

**Sasha: 'We don't have any control!'**

When I met Sasha, she had just completed the last of her requirements for a programme certificate and was awaiting the results determining graduation. In her mid-50s, Sasha had enrolled in this programme along with her daughter, to which she told me very proudly that they would be the programme's first mother–daughter graduates. Unlike Michael's experiences of dealing throughout his educational experiences with his diagnosis of dyslexia, Sasha suffered a massive brain aneurism during her studies which impacted her memory, ability to concentrate and overall energy leaving her feeling at times dizzy, nauseous and fatigued.

During her recuperation, she describes being made aware that unless she begins to attend classes again, she would be withdrawn. Outraged, not wanting to redo her completed credits and worried about her ability to obtain funding if she takes time off, she determinedly attends as many classes as she is able and completes her requirements. The source of her outrage stems from not being included in the decision-making process to withdraw in spite 'stay [in] within their rules' (Interview 1, 2):

Sasha: Well I was upset because of being removed from the programme without my knowledge – I don't know what they think, but they have so much power over students that if they see fit, they will remove you. But the person – they shouldn't have that much power. They shouldn't – all my fellow students they were like you know they have that much power over us to remove us out if they see fit? That we don't have control over our own education! We don't have control!

SB: Did they ever explain the reasons why they wanted to remove you?

Sasha: No! No, they just said ahhh we're sorry! I'm going I have no witness, no written apology; I had nobody to come over and say ah we're sorry, we didn't realize that we didn't have the power to do this. They just act like they were embarrassed. They said they were sorry they did this. And you know my fellow students were kind of upset too because they realized how little control they have over themselves in the programme by what they did to me ... Everybody in those offices have control over you. You don't really have control over yourself. They can say when, they can automatically discard you – boom! – without your say. (Interview 1, 17)

Again, as with Michael, this is where I assumed the critical moment would occur between Sasha's knowledge of following the rules yet still being barred, a moment that would tear apart any meritocratic understanding she may have held. And, again, this didn't occur. Instead Sasha told me very emphatically of the extra energy and effort she's had to devote to her studies, how determined she's had to become and how she's had to discover strength she did not know she had and to rely on the support of her family and other students enrolled in the programme:

Sasha: I was determined to walk back in there. I was staggering in class, literally. I sat down. I was sweating. I sat through the class and she (Sasha's daughter) says, 'Okay, I'm taking you home now'. She put me in the truck and drive me back and she went back to study. She put me to bed and said now you've got to come back tomorrow. She was so determined to get through this. I guess she knows my strength. She said I know you can get through this. Get read for class tomorrow. So I would read all night and get up the next day. Get all ready. But after sleeping, you know, I slept a long time, I could get up. You could look at me and never think anything was wrong. I just got so tired and was sweating...I managed...I built up my strength and after that I was fine. (Interview 1,16)



Sasha: ... I went to one week of classes and am so frustrated cause I can't keep up! I can't take notes, I can't listen... So some of my classmates noticed I was really getting frustrated trying to take notes and one of my classmates said, I think you need a note taker. And I'm going where do I go do that? And so they said that you just go to the [Center for Students with Disabilities] and talk to them. (Interview 1, 3)

Sasha: I learned from my classmates. I didn't even know what a disability centre was; I don't even know where it is... (Laughter) I don't know where anything is! (Interview 1, 26)

Although Sasha mentions her displeasure about the lack of official direction in connecting her to resources, she admits that some of this was the result of her hesitation to approach contacts in fear of lowered teacher expectations and the possibility of such documentation always shadowing her, determining her future again without her knowledge or consent:

Sasha: Yeah! I thought about it too well if I tell them I really have a disability and this and that it's going to follow me. Are they going to write it somewhere and say but you only got because of your disability? It's like; I thought where is this going to get written down now? Where is this going to come up and say somebody down the line say, oh you have a disability, can you tell me about it? Is it you now? Where is it written in that programme office, is it going to follow me or something like that? ...I'm go gee I wonder who is gong to categorize me in that area now? Without me knowing! That's the part that really gets me, without me knowing. (Interview 1, 27-8)

Yet, again she reiterates her desire to not attract attention to herself, to keep her head down and graduate. Asking for accommodations already places students in an uncomfortable position as they must approach their instructors and initiate the process, navigating the power differentials between teacher and student, assumptions or misunderstandings the teacher may have regarding the student's ability to perform the requirements of the programme, thereby creating another potential obstacle requiring additional effort to address. Asking for accommodations may mean weighing out the options of not asking depending on how much help or hindrance may result:

Sasha: Well I didn't want to rock the boat. I would never rock the boat. [Laugh]

SB: Just trying to get through and finish your programme?

Sasha: Ummhumm yeah. Sometimes it was frustrating. Really frustrating. You know like I would be at home and in the middle of the night I would be I can't understand it. You're looking at your notes and trying to remember the lesson, trying to remember the lesson was the hardest part and then understand it. So I would dig up all my notes and books and read everything and read the notes. But I had to work like two or three times more probably than anybody else to understand the concepts. So my disability got me to the point where I did a lot of work, a lot of thinking. But in the end I think it helped anyway because when I was in class I did the same thing, reviewed all my notes, read my books. (Interview 1, 7-8)

Sasha had already experienced a similar scenario during the practicum portion of her programme where she had to request that her mentoring teacher take the time to provide her with written instruction so that she could fully understand which tasks were expected of her. Although she had prepared several options, the mentor insisted she redo a unit she had previously prepared; abandoning the new units she had worked on:

- Sasha: But I had prepared [a] unit and I prepare a couple of other ones and ahh she wasn't satisfied. So then she said why don't you do your First Nations thing? I know you have one. Yes I do. So why don't you do that one? You are very familiar with it [.] So I said well I guess so, well it wasn't my plan. I was kind of frustrated because I had put all the effort beforehand to work on these other units and then she has to do something that I had I ready had, I had already done. So then they said hand [it] in [.] I said well ummm I kind of umm and hawed and I kind of wanted to do my other unit but so I agreed with them to do something I had already done in a class before. I was saying well I put all my effort in the other one! ... I worked hard.
- SB: Why do you think she was trying to push you into doing the other material you had already done in the other classes?
- Sasha: Ummm, maybe she didn't feel confident that I could do it because she knew my disability right. So I was wondering if that was maybe she didn't feel confident that I could do it. (Interview 1, 15)

However, the telling of her experiences, of explaining why she understands herself in a certain way over others, cannot be separated from who, where, when and how she is located with the everyday. As Sasha eloquently puts it:

- Sasha: [T]hey (classmates) didn't treat me any different than the way before I had my accident and had I been any place else I would have been scared. Scared out of my mind of what people thought of me! That's the labels. Cause I'm a minority, a First Nations woman minority, I get labelled already. So I was definitely scared of more labels added on to my labels. Yeah, that was a biggie. (Interview 1, 15)

Hence, meritocracy, nose to the grindstone, hands ready to pull up those bootstraps, is in no way about clinging to false assumptions that the world will suddenly be transformed positively by a little elbow grease. Nor is it about being duped into believing social transformation is brought about as easily as taking out a soft cloth and polish to restore the lustre to tarnished ideals. Meritocracy can be about regaining control needed to get past gate keeping procedures like university requirements. It can be about survival and about doing what needs to be done in a specific moment to achieve other ends. Like Michael who read his experiences through meritocracy as a reason to push harder and toughen up, as a reason for action and agency, Sasha reads meritocracy as an active response to oppressive structural barriers.

### ***Lilly: 'Unfair advantage in the real world'***

Lilly, unlike Michael and Sasha, had spent all of her educational experiences identified as exceptionally bright and enrolled within enriched programmes offered to gifted children. A first-year graduate student, she had already been awarded a research grant and had just published her first article based on her undergraduate work with her now research supervisor. Lilly's diagnosed disability, dysgraphia, came to the forefront when she applied for the gifted programme during the ninth grade. Aware that her written work was consistently weaker than other skills, she did not consider this discrepancy unusual as she still managed to score within the top of her class. Many of her classroom teachers attributed this difference to exam anxiety with the exception of one, who encouraged further investigation:

- Lilly: I remember there was this where I was getting 90s on all my take homes but 70s on all my tests. So a lot of my teachers thought I had test writing anxieties

and I was pretty sure I didn't. I would go into an exam pretty happy and confident...I had one good teacher who backed me and would say, 'No, she's fine. She's not nervous'. (Interview 1, 2)

Completing assessment testing which identified her as dysgraphic (a disorder in which the brain and hand do not synchronize their efforts when placing pen to paper) and then encouraged to type all her written assignments, she describes as a freeing moment yet a moment in which she realized the 'truth' of the assessment testing:

- SB: What was your reaction to going through the testing?  
 Lilly: ...I discovered that I could type and it was really important. I started being aware myself at that point that there was something going on. When I typed, things flowed and they had never flowed before with my written answers, so I started typing more... With the testing I knew what was going on and was trying to convince people to put it down on paper. [I] guess that was what it was...It was also late enough on with already having the gifted label, having the LD (learning disability) label stuck on was [not] that discouraging so much as giving me a right to giving me access to something that would make me able to perform. But [it was] something I was really worried about, especially for younger kids, the idea of putting on the LD label, but having them grow up with that concept that clearly – I can never be expected to perform as well. I mean I was already an overachiever so to give me a label that said I was exceptional therefore I can't do well was more well now you're going to help me do well. I think that was different from a lot of kids who end up with a label on their transcripts. (Interview 1, 2)

Yet, in so much as Lilly understood herself as holding a particular label and thus not expected to do as well as was reinforced to her by her grade five science teacher:

- Lilly: Yeah, I had a good science teacher that year but she said I didn't have any potential to go anywhere – but I was bored out of my mind in her class! (Interview 1, 4)

She understood her that the assessment testing which lead to a diagnosis also freed her to pursue other activities outside of her studies as much as it marked her as different:

- Lilly: When I was allowed to use a computer I could write better. I didn't tell anybody, but in grade 9 I was the only kid in class with a laptop. No wonder my friends thought my parents were rich! Her parents got her a laptop! It was tough 'cause I already stood out in class, like I was already the smart one, I was top of our class because I worked pretty hard, but I guess one of the things that really sticks out is grade 9. In grade 9 I started playing volleyball and using the computer. Suddenly I wasn't spending seven hours a night hand-writing my assignments. I was typing my assignments and playing volleyball in three hours. So it gave me the time to become well rounded instead of having my studies be the only things in order to do as well as I wanted to. (Interview 1, 5)

Unsurprisingly she supports assessment testing and the need for parents and students to advocate for accommodations, but she also makes clear a distinct tension between accommodations as a right and accommodations as special treatment:

- Lilly: Yeah, I think that in order to get the accommodation, I really believe that you have a disability and it doesn't mean you're stupid ...you have the right to accommodations and you really have to believe you need it. (Interview 1, 11)

Meritocracy for Lilly is not a way to articulate her gender and class identity as a brave face nor is it a strategic response to systemic oppression like racism; meritocracy operates as an opportunity to offer equality that emphasizes her normalcy:

- Lilly: I guess with my own label, it's something I have to be very, very careful of. [The] fear that they will stigmatize you is where the fear is from and going to be a problem. So I try to keep aware of it. You try to keep your work [up]. (Interview 1, 14)
- Lilly: I want to be the one who asks the smart questions, not the one who can't write. (Interview 1, 14)

Meritocracy is one path to normalcy that on the surface it provides comforting reassurance that the substance of oppression is recognized but individualizes any explanation of inequality so that the response resides within individual effort. Although Lilly is aware of her class privilege, her schooling success is only explained by the application of these factors, not by class, gender or ethnic privilege even though she recognizes the difficulty other students may have in accessing the appropriate accommodations. Unlike Michael and Sasha who leveraged a sense of agency and autonomy, for Lilly, the promise of meritocracy allows her to articulate her right for accommodations that does not reside on her class privilege as 'special treatment'.

***Sandra: 'I had to train him to please the teacher!'***

Sandra, in her mid-60s and a graduate student, had both experiences as a student with a reading disorder (never diagnosed through a battery of psychological IQ assessments) and as a retired remedial educator. Facilitating many programmes designed to teach literacy skills to adults and children, as well as ESL students, Sandra never considered herself as 'disabled' and assumed everyone had similar reading experiences in which the words shifted, blinked or literally ran ahead of the page. She compensated for this by copious note taking in order to retain the information, by using her finger as a guide while she read, by reading aloud and asking other students questions about their class work and studies. These efforts, instead of marking her for educational intervention, were viewed by her teachers as academic.

Like Lilly, she seems to understand the purpose of special education is to correct 'deficiencies' or mediate them in ways which allow students to achieve a degree of 'normalcy'. When speaking about her adult literacy student, she says:

- Sandra: So I think that's what we had to sort of, what we had to figure out, you know, how to tell them the story. Then we would say, 'Well that part fits in here on the form and that part fits in here'. And that's what they wanted. And you know your number is because, this is your age and your birthday. Because they are always very paranoid about why people want the information and what they're going to do with it, you know, so the more you explain it to them that the government has to have this and so on, the more they are able to fit it into the categories in the way that the person is expecting it to come in on the form. And also to keep the information that is not going to help them out of that form too. You know, to make them safe. That was a really important thing as well – not to tell everybody everything as well. You don't tell somebody that your cousin is a member of the mafia! (Laughter) (Interview 1, 3)

That her student's response to the reading materials or to questions for personal information required on their government forms might be interpreted not as a literacy

problem, but as a specific response to marginalization, does not appear in her conversation. Although she openly addresses her student's involvement with substance abuse or the sex trade, she steers clear of more structural explanations. This may be explained by her advice to special educational policy-makers:

SO: Yeah... let's see... (pause) I think we really have to get away from it...umm as much as possible because once you get into labelling things people lose sight that you can be, can contribute. They are so focused on you seeing the world differently and being different that you have the strength and you can live as happily as anyone else. So the quicker you get to them and do some adaptations like that the coloured paper, whatever the students' need, an isolated place to work, a box in the corner, sort of thing or whatever strategies they need to work. If they get those right away in grade one, grade two, grade three and learn how to overcome what bothers them...[y]ou won't need to have the special education. (Interview 1, 8)

One of the purposes of schooling therefore is to create equal opportunity to achieve normalcy. In describing her experiences raising her sons, who she describes as having similar reading and attention troubles as herself, as a remedial teacher in and out of different schools she actively mitigated her son's educational experiences by deliberately explaining their differences as something more sympathetic, physically altering the equipment her son's used or through strategies she taught them at home to behave and appear 'normal':

Sandra: ...So I actually trained them to cope with the school... I had to train him to, like put his books on the other side of the room so he had to go, like I got him a desk that was broken so he couldn't keep his books inside. So he had to go over across the room to get his books. I said, 'Go and sharpen your pencil once a period. Ask to go to the bathroom once a period, but not with the same teacher of course!' Just so he could get up and go. And I gave him a drawing book so he could draw umm when he's finished his work and so on. But yeah, sure they would have been in trouble otherwise if I hadn't had the skills to tell them.

...Once he had a grade one teacher, she phoned me...She phoned me the second day and said, 'I just can't cope with this child, he won't sit still and he says he knows how to do all these things (laughter) and is always making trouble in the classroom!' I said, 'Ohhh, know what! I just remembered I started him on these new vitamin pills and I'll stop them right away. I notice that they made him like really hyperactive, you know. I'll stop them right away. Phone me on Friday and we'll see if it made a difference you know'. So when he came home I said you can't do [that.] So let's figure out what you're going to do with her and so I trained him to please her you know and please himself at the same time. So she called me on Friday and said I'm really glad you stopped those pills! (Laughter) He wasn't taking any pills at all! (Laughter). (Interview 2, 6-7)

While there is recognition of her privileged ability to intervene on behalf of her sons, meritocracy allows her to articulate and affirms a desire to help and promote equality while that does not rest on her privilege. In this way, Sandra is able to maintain both her helping roles as mother and professional.

Hence meritocracy just isn't a way to hide inequalities under the cover of social justice; rather it is a way to articulate an understanding of equality and justice through normalcy. The trouble with meritocracy isn't that it is a mythology, a lie or a convenient way to dupe otherwise well meaning people into abandoning their best intentions. Rather it is about fulfilling those intentions. Hence, for the participants,

although they recognized the need to receive accommodations as special educational students and were subject to potential stigma, special education was also about the opportunity to become normal with rejecting their identities as persons with disabilities, as they defined it in relation to who and how they knew themselves.

***Reading meritocracy: I have ability too! New questions about pedagogies of success***

To borrow from Raymond Williams (1991), meritocracy and normalcy are residual (that is informing hegemonic ideologies) which are informing a new and emergent meaning about ability. While none of the participants did not argue they felt their label as disabled was in anyway ‘made up’, the stress they place upon meritocratic ideas of effort and fairness are not only about normalcy, but about retaining and reclaiming a space to announce their abilities as thoughtful, capable social actors, apart from understanding of deficit. Ideologies of meritocracy and normalcy are rewoven to offer a new reading of disability and ability which do not duel.

Instead, the stress the participants place on meritocratic understandings of effort is not a causal statement that attempts to compensate for deficiency through implied meanings of normalcy, but is a way to articulate ability. The struggle and effort they engage is about stating an ability which does not neglect disability. Disability is not an automatic default deficit position but one in which its abilities must be struggled over to be acknowledged. This is in opposition to understandings which take the disability as deficit and turn it into cause for pride and celebration. Yet it is not a response that fails to recognize normalcy as oppressive, but arises out of that understanding. The participants recognized how a disability identity could be viewed as stigmatizing (Goffman 1963). Hence, it is also in opposition to a neo-liberal multicultural understanding of inclusion which creates homogeneity through acknowledging the surface emblems of difference but rejects their structural processes.

The participants are taking those meritocratic understandings about hard work, effort and determination and applying them to normalcy which transforms it from an experience of oppression to one which acknowledges the power, not powerlessness in disability labelling. A more familiar reading may be one which reads meritocracy as an extension of normalcy that concludes disability as deficit, as a powerless position. In this way, special education/schooling is reduced to a normalizing process which hunts for disability through the application of its measures and milestones (Baker 2002). It does not get past as Bernadette Baker points out, ‘... a critique of labeling or overrepresentation turns on the view that “normal” students are really being mislabeled and made closer on a scale to “genuinely” “disabled” students, than it does not undermine the presumption that “it’s better to be dead than disabled”’ (685). The participants directly challenge this, pointing out that the hunt has been in all the wrong places for all the wrong reasons.

If we once more pay attention to the participants’ words, their experiences become more complex than a singular reading of normalcy and meritocracy as a strategy to articulate agency, identity or survival. They are utilizing these discourses that seem to only contain meanings of ‘being a burden’, of worthlessness and deficit to articulate a positive understanding of disability. As a response back to special education, if its premise to promote equality is to be taken up, as these students offer that path is not in amending disability as something in need of fixing, either through fixed definitions or remedial programmes, but in challenging those common sense notions that disability is something to be fixed. While maybe not defining themselves as success stories

of policies gone right, they challenge the premise of a policy attempting to address something gone wrong. Rather, each participant struggles and uses the resources available to demonstrate their ability, to show the ways in which they are able to compete and achieve. It is a meritocratic reading that cuts against the grain, retaining shades of normalcy that do not wash out disability. It is a challenging reading in that it also asks whether it is possible to reimagine ability without ableism that casts persons with disabilities as deficient and lacking; if it is possible to imagine assistance without a liberal autonomy that moralizes dependency with disgust. It becomes a new articulation of a discourse that proudly proclaims, 'I love it. I accept it as part of who I am'.

### Acknowledgements

Special acknowledgements and thanks to Dr. Leslie Roman for her suggestions and support during the process of this work. Her insights have been instrumental in sparking both a passionate and profound scholarship that transforms and redefines, if not transcends, the boundaries of academic work.

### Notes on contributor

Sheena Brown holds a master's degree from the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. She is also the award recipient of the 2005 Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Master's scholarship. She was also a graduate research assistant on Dr Roman's Social Sciences and Humanities grant.

### References

- Alcoff, L. 1991. The problem of speaking for others. *Cultural Critique* 20: 5–32.
- Baker, B. 2002. The hunt for disability: The new eugenics and the normalization of school children. *Teachers College Record* 104, no. 4: 663–703.
- British Columbia Ministry of Education. 2006. *Special education services: A manual of policies, procedures and guidelines*. Victoria: BC Ministry of Education.
- Davis, L.J. 1995. Constructing normalcy. In *Enforcing normalcy: Disability, deafness and the body*, 23–49. London: Verso.
- Goffman, E. 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Kirsch, G.E. 1999. *Ethical dilemmas in feminist research: The politics of location, interpretation, and publication*. Albany: State of University of New York Press.
- Wendell, S. 1996. *The rejected body: Feminist philosophical reflections on disability*. New York: Routledge.
- Williams, R. 1991. Base and superstructure in Marxist cultural theory. In *Rethinking popular culture*, ed. C. Mukerji and M. Schudson, 407–23 (Chapter 15). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.