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Dear Mrs. P: An Exploration in the Beliefs of High-Expectations for Individuals with Disabilities

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Abstract

This article is a narrative exploring the topic of self-advocacy and self-determination for individuals with disabilities. Through my narrative, I explore ways that we can increase expectations of individuals with disabilities.

Keywords

Disability Studies, Scholarly Personal Narrative, Self-Advocacy

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Dear Mrs. P: An Exploration in the Beliefs of High-Expectations for Individuals with Disabilities

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This article is a narrative exploring the topic of self-advocacy and self-determination for individuals with disabilities. Through my narrative, I explore ways that we can increase expectations of individuals with disabilities. Keywords: Disability Studies, Scholarly Personal Narrative, Self-Advocacy

I am a disability studies scholar. As a as a disability studies scholar I am engaged in both advocacy and scholarship designed to improve the lives of individuals with disabilities. Most of my scholarship is around self-advocacy and self-determination of individuals with developmental disabilities. Self-advocacy and self-determination roughly mean helping individuals with disabilities to be empowered in their own lives. As a disability studies scholar I have argued for total inclusion for individuals with disabilities. As a young professional in a College of education environment, I think it is important to teach a version of inclusion and empowerment for individuals with disabilities.

In my day job, I am a Ph.D. student in counseling education and supervision. I am also a licensed mental health counselor. I conduct both qualitative and quantitative research. This is a narrative about an interaction I had with one individual when I was in grade school. Let me tell you about how this project has evolved over the last couple of months.

About a year ago, I took my initial qualitative research class. It was at this time that I fell in love with the idea of conducting narrative research. With assistance from my professor who has mentored me in qualitative research, I set out to write an article about my experiences as an individual with a disability. I knew that I wanted this to be a narrative piece of some sort, but I was not sure how to go about doing this. What I did not know is what format this project going take. I initially thought that this project was going to be an auto-ethnography of some sort. I have always been fascinated with autoethnography. Carolyn Ellis, the great autoethnographer, is one of my heroes. Reading *Final Negotiations* (Ellis, 1995) was one of the best narratives I have ever read. I wanted to try to emulate her. However, I realized that I did not have what I needed to publish a complete autoethnography. As such, I consider this a scholarly personal narrative. This is my attempt to tell my story about growing up as an individual with a disability in the public-school system.

It should be stated that this type of writing, scholarly personal narratives, is commonly used with individuals from marginalized populations (Nash & Viray, 2013). I do recognize that individuals with disabilities are considered a marginalized population. Besides being a disability studies scholar, I am an individual with a disability. I do have difficulty discussing the fact that I am from a marginalized population, but I have done significant reflexivity on this topic and it is my hope to change the narrative about individuals with disabilities being from marginalized populations. I believe that we need to increase the expectations of individuals with disabilities. We need to stop pondering what individuals with disabilities can't do and start exploring what supports individuals with disabilities need to succeed in society. This is what my colleagues commonly call the ecological framework (Walker et al., 2011).

I should state from the beginning that I write this article out of frustration. I am a disability studies scholar who has been frustrated with the fact of the beliefs of low expectations

that society has placed on individuals with disabilities. This is one way that I am trying to critique the school system and increase the expectations for individuals with disabilities.

Having said that, I do not want this article to be considered inspiration porn. I acknowledge that I am only speaking for myself and not for all individuals with a disability. This narrative is not a pull up by the bootstraps narrative. I recognize that there are significant barriers and obstacles that individuals with disabilities face today. It is my belief as a disability studies scoundrel that we need to find a way to reduce these burials and obstacles.

Narrative as method

Narrative is only one aspect of my scholarship. Because of the uniqueness of this article I thought I would get away with a limited discussion on my methodologies concerning this manuscript. However, I have to recognize that even a unique manuscript such as this requires an explanation of the methodology I am utilizing. What follows is a brief discussion of the process I use when writing a narrative such as this. My inspiration in narrative scholarship and what I believe to be the meaning of the narrative. Overall these are my methods for this manuscript.

As a qualitative researcher I have engaged in extensive issues of reflexivity as it relates to my disability, growing up with a disability, and providing counseling services with a disability. This manuscript is the product of some of that reflexivity. I have written this manuscript over the course of a year. This manuscript was written under the supervision of Lauren, my qualitative research teacher and a faculty member at the University of South Florida. In addition, this manuscript was reviewed by a colleague in the Department of sociology, who is also a disability studies scholar.

When I set out to write any narrative manuscript, I set out with writing a story. This story could take several weeks to several months for me to produce. After the story is told, I give it to somebody to review. After the final narrative is set, I normally try to put in additional references to support my argument in the narrative. However, in reflecting writing on this piece, I stated that this narrative speaks for itself. This manuscript is trying to communicate the importance of inclusion and high expectations for individuals with disabilities. What follows is a narrative to Mrs. P. Mrs. P was a teacher of mine who taught me reading when I was in an intensive reading class in middle school. As a disability studies scholar it is my hope to bridge communities. The community of academia and the community of individuals with disabilities.

As a narrative scholar I see real power in the construction of narrative. It is my goal to not only be a bridge of communities, but to attempt to communicate social change through narrative. It is my hope that the concepts presented in this narrative will speak for itself and allow the readers to think about what I am trying to communicate. I am always trying to advocate for in my scholarship to improve the lives of individuals with disabilities.

What follows is my narrative Mrs. P.

Dear Mrs. P: A reflection on high expectations

I remember like it was yesterday. I was your student in an intensive reading class Buchanan middle school. It was in the morning.

I knew why I was in your intensive reading class.

For the longest time I have struggled with reading. Based on my test scores, I definitely needed to be in your intensive reading class. My reading score at that time hovered around 2nd to 3rd grade reading level. I earned my place to be in your class.

During this particular day, we have been doing a group activity in the back of the classroom. There was about six or seven students in the class. Somehow, I asked the question

about my future. About will I be able to go off to a college or a university. I remember what you said. You said,

“you would probably never be able to complete an associates’ of arts degree at the local community college.”

This statement made me really upset. I was shocked and stunned. I knew that I struggled with reading, but I thought I would always be able to overcome my struggles if I just work hard enough. I was in eighth grade. That decision was premature to make based on my reading scores. I was confused because you were a Special Education teacher, and I had the belief that Special Education was meant to be creative, help students succeed, and empower them.

It was at this time that I became very upset at you. I still remember you. You were a new teacher to the school. You were tall and you had curly blonde hair. You were casually dressed. You had a charming and bubbly personality. I remember you.

I still remember what it was like to be in your classroom. I was embarrassed with the fact that I struggled with reading already. However, I was trying to make the best of the situation that I found myself in. That was before you made that comment. After you told me “you would probably never be able to complete a associate’s of arts degree at the local community college,” I was not only embarrassed but I was also confused. I was confused because I did not think that was how a Special Education teacher was, but another thing confused me.

Why were your expectations for me so different than my parents’ expectations?

I was trying to improve my abilities and live up to my parents’ expectations. What were those expectations you might ask?

Despite the fact that I was diagnosed with cerebral palsy and a learning disability, my expectations were the same as my sister. Despite that I had some barriers and obstacles to overcome, I could do anything that I could put my mind to. This was communicated to me since the time I was very little. I was raised by three terrific individuals David, Iris, and Nancy Chapman. For them education was very important and valued in the family. I remember that my mom would read to me every night and be with me as I struggled with the task of reading. Both my dad and Nancy would do the same thing. They were always investing in ways to improve my reading abilities. They always found ways to communicate their expectation for me on a regular basis. This was nothing new. They had every expectation that I would one day go to college and succeed.

Several times throughout my life I was taken to various places around the country for specialized evaluations into my disability. This was not unusual during this time in history. All of these evaluations tended to be comprehensive educational evaluations. They all came up with the same conclusion, which was that with the right supports and services I could achieve a college education. My family made every effort to communicate this to me every chance they got. This was the expectation in my family’s household. As I struggled with reading, my mom would sit with me as I read. My dad and stepmom would let me dream about the possibilities of what my life would be like as I grew up. They kept echoing to me the statement that I could do anything that I put on my mind on. They never told me this was going to be easy and that was okay with me. I did not need it easy, I just needed possible.

My family simply do not give up on me. They acknowledged the fact that yes, I did have a disability and that disability was something that I was going to have to live with for the rest of my life. However, they taught me a lot of creative ways to live and to do stuff differently

because of my disability. These were the expectations that they had for me. They continued to be in the struggle with me. For that I am incredibly grateful.

Every day my family taught me not to use my disability as a crutch. I remember vividly being disciplined, because I would use my disability to do what I wanted. For example, I used to escape the line at theme parks because of my disability. Now no one likes waiting in long lines at theme parks, however this is part of the experience for everyone not just those with disabilities. There was nothing wrong with my ability to wait in line, so I had to wait. This was the family's expectations.

My family taught me to be very persistent. They knew that I had to overcome some obstacles and barriers in my life. However, they continued to push me. Some people have argued that I am an inspiration to them. I don't agree with that statement. If anything, my family is the inspiration. They are the ones that set the expectations not just for me but for all of my siblings. They had a high expectation for us all. It has been because of them that I have tried to promote high expectations for all individuals with disabilities in my personal and professional lives.

This is what my family instilled in me since I was a very young child. I actually believed in this. You were the only person in my life that did not have expectations for me. The fact was you had different expectations than my family, why was that?

I keep coming back to the fact that I do not know why that this is still something that I find so difficult? When I was asked to write this, I thought I have already dealt with the issues in this narrative. I teach individuals that work in the school system. I always try to instill in them a belief that they need to have high expectations for all of the students that they will have. This is regardless of the fact if they have a disability or not. I have the belief that when we give up on a student, they give up on themselves. This is true for people to.

As I reflect back to the moment where you lowered your expectations of me, I am thinking about what my life would have been like if I had bought into the idea that based on statistics that I would not achieve what I could achieve. I think it would probably be that I would have a difficult time as I finished school. I probably would've still struggled with reading throughout my life. I probably would have lost the passion for education and school. I probably would have started a job at a grocery store. Also, there was a possibility that I might have been on some type of government assistance. This is not the life my family had chosen for me. Like I stated above, it was instilled in my head by all the members of my family: Do not let your disability be a crutch.

As I have progressed in my education, I realized that my family's philosophy towards inclusion is actually represented in a field of academia. I discovered this because I am currently in a Ph.D. program in Counseling Education and Supervision. Did you think I could become a Ph.D. student? Also, I am a professional counselor. In both of these cases, I have far exceeded the expectations that you had of me. With my current level of expertise, I thought I would share my knowledge about individuals with disability with you in the hopes that you and other educators would glean some lessons.

The majority of my experience with disability advocacy and research comes from the realm of community living. Back in 1979, the Center on Human Policy at Syracuse University came out with their Community Imperative for Individuals with Disabilities. The Community Imperative states: "All people have basic human and legal rights" (Center on Human Policy, 1979). These rights must not be taken away just because a person has a mental or physical disability. Included in these basic rights is the right to live in the community. In terms of education and support services:

- All people are valuable
- All people have strength and abilities

- All people have the right to services in their lives that support these strengths and abilities
- These supports are best provided in the community

This framework can be applied to include all individuals with disabilities. The imperative supports my notion that we need to have high expectations for individuals with disabilities. This is not the only piece of groundbreaking research and policy that support my beliefs. This framework has shaped my view about the lives of individuals with disabilities. It has challenged my views of low expectations and it has set the ones that I have chosen to live my life.

I have dedicated a great portion of my time in the development of self-advocates around the state of Florida. My research is bent on self-advocacy and self-determination of individuals with disabilities. My focus in my professional life has been Basically, determining how we can empower individuals with disabilities to live the lives that they choose. Basically, how can they live a self-determined life.

The “medical model” (Smart & Smart, 2006) is one way of studying disability. This model is also called the “biomedical model of disability.” This model sees individuals with disabilities as having limitations that affect them. This model views individuals with disabilities as having a medical problem. This model also sees the medical professional as the expert.

There is a different model of studying disability. This model is commonly referred to as the “social model of disability.” According to Magasi (2008), disability is a form of social oppression. The “social model” does not view disability as a limitation that needs to be treated by a medical professional. This article also introduces the concept of disability pride.

I have always advocated for the use of the self-advocacy/social political model of disability. I believe that we need to be doing everything that we can to advocate for individuals with disabilities. I hate that some people have low expectations of individuals with disabilities. When I teach student or other individuals on the three models of disability, I spend the majority of time on the self-advocacy model of disability.

As a special education teacher Mrs. P, I wonder what model of disability you operate from? Most special education professionals operate from a model that is based on treatment of the disability. There was a way that you can operate from a framework that seeks to empower individuals with disabilities, instead of focusing on the limitations. They tend to focus on the medical model of disability. However, I have met some really wonderful special education, believe the students can succeed and do everything they can to empower them to succeed.

As I studied the models of disability, I keep coming back to one question Mrs. P: why did you operate from a deficit-based model of disability or what is called the medical model of disability? While everyone else around me was operating on a self-advocacy, and student-based approach.

My mentor has done a lot of research around the area of strength and strength-based communication. He has identified Eleven different types of strengths, (Davis, Mayo, Piccora, & Wimberley, 2012). I often wonder why is it that special education has spent a majority of time focusing on the limitations of an individual. Why couldn't you spend more time improving my core strength?

I feel often that special education is built upon models surrounding deficits instead of assets and strengths. I believe that we need to spend more time reconceptualizing special education and moving away from the deficit way of thinking. Recently, as I was preparing for my qualifying exams for my Ph.D. program – yes, Mrs. P., I am in a Ph.D. program – I ran across a model that conceptualizes disability in very unique ways. It is a Social-Ecological Approach to disability. What I like about this model is that it is a very holistic view on disability (Shogren, 2013). This model focuses on providing holistic ports for individuals with disabilities. This model is about the promotion of self-determination.

I am very interested in the areas of self-advocacy and self-determination for individuals with disabilities. Walker et. al (2011) has come up with a Social-Ecological Model of self-determination. The model is based on how individuals can make choices, achieve social inclusion, and increase social capital. Their model is all about the promotion of inclusion. The idea of inclusion is about promoting a more diverse society. Inclusion is about having high expectations for everyone. I do not blame you for not being able to implement this model in your classroom. There was an emphasis on high stakes testing back in the 1990s when I was in middle school. However, I hypothesize now, as I am writing this, that if you took a more holistic approach to my education and possibly implement this model, I wonder what my experiences would have been like. Would I have done things more differently? What I have taken a different approach? I wonder.

Epilogue: My life now Mrs. P

I would like to show you what my life has been like. Right now, I am writing this in my office just off campus of the University of South Florida. I am a licensed mental health counselor in the State of Florida. I specialize in working with individuals that have disabilities, individuals that have struggled with physical and sexual abuse, individuals that struggled with addictions and domestic violence. Right now, I have a very small private practice, not because I am having difficulty with maintaining employment, but because I am a full-time Ph.D. student. I am getting my Ph.D. in Counseling Education and Supervision. I want to train other individuals to be counseling professionals. I am involved in research about how we can improve the lives of individuals with disabilities. I consider myself to be a disability studies scholar. I write, I present, and I am competitive at the doctoral level. Over the next couple of years, I will be seeking a position in academia. The expectations that I have for myself is that one day I will be the dean of a college at a university. I will conduct research, write articles, and write grants. I will one day write a book or two or three. These are the expectations that I have for myself.

I do not blame you for your comments. You were trying to do the best with the information that you had. Reflecting on this experience, I would like to offer you some advice for the benefit of your students. Especially since you are a special education teacher. Have you believed that students will succeed?

You always need to have high expectations for individuals with disabilities. Frankly, you need to have high expectations for all students with all types of abilities. Having high expectations doesn't mean you provide false hope, but it means you know is the fact that some students will struggle and help them in the process of learning.

Not every student will learn the same. You might need to change your teaching strategies based on the students. This is okay.

It is important when you make a judgment about a student's future that you have multiple data points. Individuals with disabilities are often underestimated and just need to be given a chance.

I hope this letter has giving you insights about the lives of individuals with disabilities. I want to encourage you to always have high expectations for students with disabilities again. Do not place labels on them and help them rise to the occasion. Help all individuals in your class be their greatest. Help them to not place limits on themselves.

Sincerely, Richard.

Afterthought: Narrative as method

I think it is important to talk about narrative as a method. As a narrative scholar, I believe narrative and stories is a form of social change. Narrative is only aspect of my scholarship as a disability studies scholar. As a disability studies scholar, I look at self-advocacy and self-determination of individuals with disabilities. Ultimately, I am asking the question how we can increase self-determination of individuals with disabilities. Ultimately self-determination, is about increasing individuals ability or capability to exercise control over their own lives. As a scholar of self-determination, this has always been a key theme of my scholarship.

I sit down and I write when I construct a narrative. I write narratives over the course of several months, to several years. One of my other narrative projects that I have been working on for the last four or five years has been on my experiences as a mental health counselor, with a disability. This project has been a labor of love and has taken a long time to come to a point where it's finally ready for publication. I am happy to say that will be published at the end of this year in a book about narrative and disability. It takes time for me to construct a narrative.

I have had the great fortune of being part of the University of South Florida community. This community is made up of great scholars in the narrative and ethnography field. I've had the great fortune of sitting in on presentations and being mentored by some of these great scholars. As I reflect on writing this piece, it is my hope that this piece will serve a variety of purposes. This is first and foremost a piece on narrative and disability. This is a piece of disability studies scholarship. This is a piece of narrative methodology. It is my hope that this would spark a discussion on the use of narrative in academic scholarship.

More importantly, I believe that this is a piece of education pedagogy, for the public education system. I write this piece to promote the belief that not only do we need to have high expectations for all students, but we need to have these expectations for students with disabilities.

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