

# **My Critical Incident, Which Led me to Becoming a Researcher**

*Zanele Myles*

*Master's Student*

*Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland*

[zjm148@mun.ca](mailto:zjm148@mun.ca)

Since I was young I wanted to become a teacher. This goal would eventually lead me to undertaking my Master's of Education and becoming a researcher in this field. The dream of becoming a teacher was clear, despite my difficulties in school. At the age of five I was diagnosed with having a learning disability (LD), and at eighteen I faced one of my life's main obstacles: as a student with LD, I needed to complete a formal psycho-educational assessment to be accepted into university and obtain accommodations. Consequently, I met with the school psychologist who assessed my intelligence through a set of tests in order to see what accommodations I would need in university. With extra assistance I had done well in high school until this point, and had already applied to a special program in university that supported students with LDs.

The final meeting, which took place between the school psychologist, my parents, and myself, was a turning point for me. The school psychologist told my parents and myself that, because I read at a grade six level and had difficulties in processing and working memory, she thought that I would not be able to handle university, and that I would be much better off in a community college setting. After she said this she asked me to head back to class as she wanted to talk to my parents alone. I left the room feeling very upset and discouraged. Half-way to class I recall gathering my determination, turning around and heading back to the room where the meeting was being held. I interrupted the school psychologist and I told her that it was my dream to go to university and that I was very capable because of my tremendous perseverance and effort. In fact, research states that reading ability is not a clear indicator of someone's overall intelligence (Gresham & Vellutino, 2010). With the right accommodations in place, I could study at a university level. I was not going to take the school psychologist's word as truth.

My parents told the school psychologist that they would like another opinion and would hire a private psychologist to conduct a second assessment. After undergoing another battery of tests, which included a face-to-face interview, the private psychologist wrote a detailed report and concluded that with accommodations in place, I could excel in university and go on to accomplish my life goals. As a student with a LD, I was extremely lucky and fortunate to come from a family where my parents were well educated, critical, and aware of both their own rights as parents and my rights as their child with a LD. They were informed about their options and knew that they had the right to ask for a second opinion regarding my formal assessment.

As a teacher I believe in all my students and what they are capable of doing; I don't judge them on what they can't do, but evaluate them on what they can accomplish. As Drover, the Learning Disability Coordinator of the Meighen Centre at Mount Allison University states, "students with learning disabilities do belong on campus, and we should not undervalue their strengths. They are more like the typical first year student than they are different. With careful selection,

adequate and appropriate preparation and on campus support, students with learning disabilities can succeed in every field” (Drover, 2010). Individuals can achieve their goals when they believe in themselves, have determination, and are willing to work hard.

This meeting with the school psychologist had a profound impact on me as a learner, a teacher, and now as a researcher who is studying the impact self-advocacy instruction has on both elementary and secondary students. I decided to pursue further studies in this area because in Canada it is estimated that the incidence rate of LDs range as high as 10% or more of the population (LDAO, 2011). This statistic implies that more than one in ten children have a LD, which is a high number when we consider that there is usually at least 25 students in a typical classroom. A substantial number of students with LD become over-dependent on adults and peers. They also gain a low sense of self-efficacy, develop an external locus of control, and fail to complete school or become disengaged at an early age (Palmer, et al., 2012). In turn, school policies and practices often perpetuate a culture that is violent, one that is burdening, harming, and violating to a significant number of students, which consequently hinders their learning and self-esteem (Watkinson, 1997).

The school environment is not necessarily a safe place for diverse students, particularly those with LD whom are thought of as being deficient among the school community (Ferri, Connor, Solis, Valle, & Volpitta, 2005). Repetitive destructive experiences and failure in school for these students can become a negative cycle that is hard to break. In order to restore this negative cycle, children with LD need to feel supported by their teachers and their peers, as well as work through the existent painful experiences that they might have already endured due to these negative experiences. They also need to develop a „voice“ and to be heard when their needs are not being met or when they need to ask for accommodations. Most importantly, students with LD need to learn the skills to become their own best self-advocates. They need to learn techniques that will assist them when dealing with negative experiences, such as being labelled as having LD. By learning effective communication skills, they can create empowering self-scripts and express their frustration in positive ways.

The fact is that students with LD need to practice self-advocacy before entering high school (Mishna, Muskat, Farnia, & Wiener, 2011). It is important that they, as early as possible, become aware of their own strengths, needs, and interests, and begin to communicate their choices and decisions effectively (Hart & Brehm, 2013). As a researcher, I would like to examine how best to instruct students with learning disabilities in acquiring self-advocacy skills that will assist them in accomplishing their academic and life goals. I plan on designing a mentoring program where junior high students with learning disabilities can work together with post-secondary students who also have a LD. By providing a safe and inclusive environment, students will engage in creating peace-building circles, small group activities, and role plays. The topics that will be included in the program will focus on building relationships, communication, learning needs and accommodations, as well as, goal-setting and problem-solving.

I feel grateful to have had the self-confidence, self-awareness and self-advocacy skills to head back to the meeting between the school psychologist and my parents and to stand up for what I knew I could accomplish. I would not be where I am today completing my Master’s degree if I were not able to express myself at that meeting. My desire as a researcher is to both explore ways to promote the development of self-advocacy in students, as well as be able to design

mentoring programs that will provide a space where students come together as a community to learn from older more experienced peers who also have LD. In turn, they may learn how to become successful in accomplishing their goals, as well as gain skills in self-advocacy, self-determination and self-awareness that will improve their life in and out of school.

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