

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Graduate Students With Learning Challenges: Exploring Masters Students in Early
Childhood Education

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts in Education

Educational Psychology

By

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PREFACE

I have always been amazed by the stories of children and adults with various disabilities who have defeated the odds and accomplished goals that many professionals doubted they could ever achieve. My research on special education blossomed while in graduate school where I was faced to accept the realities of my own learning disability and reflect on my goals and achievements. I became fascinated when discovering different students' strategies for their own academic success. From my research, I learned that my experiences were quite common of other students with learning disabilities (LD), which made me feel comforted – I was not alone with my feelings of struggle.

With help from my invaluable professors, research, and my own personal experiences, the topic for my thesis came to be. I wanted to focus on the positive aspects of learning disabilities. I wanted to learn how professors can better support LD students, but most importantly, I wanted LD students' to reflect on their achievements and beam with pride that they can attain a master's degree!

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to students with learning disabilities and learning challenges. I know firsthand how difficult it is to complete ordinary, everyday tasks in school and in daily life when dealing with a learning disability. With a strong will and determination, students with learning disabilities *can* achieve academic success. I encourage all learning disabled students to continue onto higher education. I believe their personal experiences, awareness of their strengths, and weaknesses contribute to figuring out strategies that will help them succeed. Achieving academic success would not be possible without the support of their families and friends, who always saw the potential in them! Their stories and resilience is truly an inspiration!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My inspiration of this study came from my own personal struggle of having a learning disability. I am exactly like the LD students in this study. I am a success story. I have defeated the negative stereotypes of students with learning disabilities and accomplished my goal of achieving a master's degree from California State University, Northridge in Early Childhood Education. There have been several people who guided me and supported me throughout my academic journey. I would like to thank the following people who have impacted my life tremendously.

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I would like to give a BIG thank you to my oldest and dearest friend Rebecca. Becca, thank you for always lifting my spirits by showing me the positive side of life and for always encouraging and inspiring me to do great things with my life, and teaching me that every challenge I encounter is just another learning/growing experience. I am truly blessed to have you as my friend.

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My final acknowledgment is to my furry feline companion who never judged me and loved me unconditionally. Emma, you will forever be loved and missed.

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ABSTRACT

Graduate Students With Learning Challenges: Exploring Masters Students in Early

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Master of Arts in Education

Educational Psychology

This study examines current students enrolled in California State University, Northridge's Early Childhood Education Master of Arts program who have identified themselves with a learning disability. It describes their academic journey in a graduate program where the reading, concepts, and skills are of a high level and often very challenging. To gather this information, a survey was distributed to all current students in the ECE MA program. A total of 40 students completed the survey, resulting in 11 students who identified themselves with either a diagnosed or suspected learning challenge. Common themes from the data suggest useful coping strategies and identify factors that contributed to their academic success.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Trouble remembering facts, pronouncing words, calculating basic mathematic equations, or processing new information are just a few characteristics of a person with a learning disability (LD) (Segal & Segal, 1999). The type and severity of the learning disability varies for each individual, but in some form or another his/her disability has impacted their life. Despite these learning challenges, more students with learning disabilities are graduating high school and enrolling in postsecondary education (Orr & Goodman, 2010). Because of the growing number of students with learning disabilities entering postsecondary education, there is a need to explore the academic journey of learning disabled students who overcome the challenges of higher education and ultimately enroll in graduate school.

“It is estimated that between 6% to 9% of college students have disabilities. Of this group, the fastest growing subgroup are students who report learning disabilities” (Leyser & Greenberger, 2008, p. 237). Students who may have struggled to manage/cope with their learning disabilities throughout their schooling often have extraordinary determination to continue onto postsecondary education. This study examines graduate students with either diagnosed learning disabilities or suspect learning challenges and their academic journey that led them to enroll in the Early Childhood Education Master of Arts program at California State University, Northridge.

Defining Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities (LD) are neurological disorders; however, students with learning disabilities have average to above average intelligence (Segal & Segal, 1999). Learning disabilities affect students' abilities in multiple academic areas including reading, writing, spelling, listening, speaking, reasoning, and understanding math concepts (Segal & Segal, 1999). Learning disabilities influence how students process information, which affects learning new information and skills (Segal & Segal, 1999). LD students often work incredibly hard in school and later in the workforce to compensate for their life-long disability (Erten, 2011). Some common types of learning disabilities are dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, dysphasia/aphasia, auditory processing disorder, and visual processing disorder (Segal & Segal, 1999). The descriptions of these common types of learning disabilities are explained in Table 1.1. The first column lists the type of learning disability following a brief definition and then examples of the learning disability in the third column.

Table 1.1

Common Types of Learning Disabilities

Dyslexia	Difficulty reading	Problems reading, writing, spelling, speaking
Dyscalculia	Difficulty with math	Problems doing math problems, understanding time, using money
Dysgraphia	Difficulty with writing	Problems with handwriting, spelling, organizing ideas
Dyspraxia (Sensory Integration Disorder)	Difficulty with fine motor skills	Problems with hand-eye coordination, balance, manual dexterity
Dysphasia/Aphasia	Difficulty with language	Problems understanding spoken language, poor reading comprehension
Auditory Processing Disorder	Difficulty hearing differences between sounds	Problems with reading, comprehension, language
Visual Processing Disorder	Difficulty interpreting visual information	Problems with reading, math, maps, charts, symbols, pictures

(Segal & Segal, 1999, para. 27)

Statement of the Problem

The problem is the lack of knowledge and understanding of learning disabilities among educators. According to Erten (2011) and May and Stone (2010), many students refuse to disclose their learning disability because professors do not understand the severity of a learning disability (Erten, 2011). As a result of students withhold their learning disability or challenge seeking outside resources to achieve academic success without the support from their professors. Because students do not disclose their learning

disability, professors are unaware of how many students with learning disabilities or challenges are enrolled in their classes; therefore, do not support LD students needs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate students with learning disabilities or challenges academic journey that led them to enroll in the Early Childhood Education Master's program at California State University, Northridge. This thesis focuses on uncovering positive attributes of graduate students' internal motivation to continue in higher education and what helped them achieve academic success.

It is important to investigate the topic of learning disabilities because of the growing number of LD students enrolling in universities (Orr & Goodman, 2010). One reason to explore LD students academic journey is for professors to learn how they can support LD students learning. From this study, Early Childhood Education professors will be able to better accommodate LD students and hopefully be inspired by their stories of determination and motivation to continue their education despite their learning disability or challenge.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is to gather information from current graduate students with learning disabilities or challenges in the ECE MA program at CSUN. From the students' response, ECE professors will be able to better foster LD students' academic development. In order for ECE professors to support LD students, it is crucial to investigate the struggles and success stories of students with learning disabilities or challenges for educators to be aware of the types of support and accommodations students with learning disabilities need in order to achieve academic success. The

responses from the participants completing the survey will benefit future students with learning disabilities or challenges in the ECE MA program at CSUN because their learning trajectories can be used as models for other students who may struggle.

Terminology

This section presents terms commonly used throughout this study as they are related to the discussions of learning disabilities. The list is organized in alphabetical order:

- *Early Childhood Education (ECE) Graduate Program* – The early childhood education program at CSUN provides students with knowledge through fieldwork opportunities leadership skills, such as communication and collaboration, advocacy, ethics and professionalism provide students with flexibility to accommodate new trends in the field; knowledge and expertise focus on: promoting child development and learning; family and community relationships; observing, documenting and assessing young children and families; understanding the teaching and learning process; and ongoing professional development. ECE students gain additional knowledge in multicultural and international themes, children with special needs and their families, research methods and technology to promote positive outcomes for children, families, the community and the early childhood profession (MA in Early Childhood Education, “Program Features”).
- *Learning disabilities (LD)* – are an umbrella term for a wide variety of learning problems. A learning disability is not a problem with intelligence or motivation. Their brains are simply wired differently. This difference affects how they receive

and process information. This can lead to trouble with learning new information and skills, and putting them to use. The most common types of learning disabilities involve problems with reading, writing, math, reasoning, listening, and speaking (Segal & Segal, 1999, para. 2-3).

Preview of Thesis

The following chapters provide detailed information about learning disabilities (LD) and the factors that contribute to LD students' academic success. Chapter Two focuses on current literature of learning disabilities involving LD student's academic experience including challenges and accomplishments, motivation to continue in higher education, and support systems, and California State University learning disability laws. Chapter Three describes the methodology of the study with attention to recruiting of subjects, the instrument developed, and the procedure. Chapter Four discusses the findings and themes from the survey. Finally, in Chapter Five, the findings from the survey are analyzed and discussed as well as limitations of the study, implications, and future research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this chapter, the literature examining various aspects of students with learning disabilities will be reviewed including the prevalence of learning challenges among university students. Specific and effective strategies that LD students use to cope and manage their disability, are mentioned as well as the importance of supportive and understanding professors and the critical role they play in students with learning disabilities lives. The goal of this literature review is to bring attention to the increased number of graduate students with a learning disability and successful academic outcomes.

This chapter is divided into areas pertinent to graduate students with LD; however, because there are scant studies on strictly graduate students, there are a few studies that are mixed with undergraduate and graduate students with learning disabilities. The first section will focus on general information about learning disabilities among college students, the second section looks at relevant articles related to graduate students college experiences, the third section examines the studies on learning disabilities and the common themes, and finally, the last section looks at California State University, Northridge laws/guidelines pertaining to learning disabilities and programs that support current students academic learning.

Review of Empirical of Students with Learning Disabilities

In this section six studies focus on graduate students in education with learning disabilities will be presented (Orr & Goodman, 2010; Erten, 2011; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; May & Stone, 2010; Ancil, Ishikawa, & Scott, 2008; Leyser & Greenberger, 2008).

The studies were similar in that they all concentrated on LD student's experience, faculty attitudes, and support. A brief summary for each of the studies is provided first then the studies are grouped by similar findings, common themes, and outcome for academic success of students with learning disabilities.

Learning Disabled College Students Experiences

Orr and Goodman (2010) explored the experiences of 14 past and present postsecondary students from a Midwestern university with learning disabilities to promote a clear understanding of LD to teachers. The 14 students included both undergraduate and graduate students. The 4 graduate students with LD (two with both Learning Disability and Attention Deficit Disorder) majored in Education and Psychology the other undergraduate students majored in communications, computer science, social work, fashion design, speech/language, biology, and business. Orr and Goodman (2010) recruited participants by advertisements posted throughout campus and a newly formed "students with disabilities" organization on campus (Orr & Goodman, 2010, p. 215). All of the participants were registered at the university's disability center.

Demographics. The 14 students included thirteen Caucasian students and 1 African-American student. Of the participants, 8 students were male and 6 were female. The majority of the students were diagnosed with a LD during their childhood ($n = 8$), while the other students were diagnosed in adulthood (Orr & Goodman, 2010). Among the participants, 6 students stated that they have been diagnosed with having a learning disability and Attention Deficit Disorder.

Orr and Goodman (2010) interviewed the 14 LD students. The first interview focused on the participant's past history as a student with a learning disability, the second

interview addressed current experiences as a college student with a learning disability and the third interview asked the participant to reflect upon the meaning of his or her experience. Each interview lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and occurred at a place and time convenient for each participant (Orr & Goodman, 2010).

Findings. The five common themes that emerged from the study included: 1) the emotional legacy of learning difficulty (negative perception of oneself); 2) the importance of interpersonal relationships and social connectivity (e.g., support of friends, family, and professors); 3) the student-owned characteristics and strategies for success; 4) the barriers to success (e.g., professors lack of knowledge of learning disabilities); and 5) the issues of diagnosis, disclosure, and identity (Orr & Goodman, 2010).

University College Women with Disabilities

Erten (2011) examined the perspectives of seven female postsecondary students' experiences at a university in Canada. The 7 participants were all between the ages of 22 and 28 and were all registered with the disability center on campus. The 7 students disabilities included learning disabilities (LD), chronic health, mobility difficulties, cognitive difficulties, and attention deficit disorder (ADD). The majors of the students included medicine, arts, anthropology, engineering, and education. The purpose of the study was to learn about the experiences of students with disabilities studying at a large university in Canada (Erten, 2011).

Demographics. All participants were registered at the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) and were receiving support services from the OSD. There were 3 participants studying at the graduate level who were receiving additional services from their faculties such as writing exams in a room designated by their departments. All 7

participants were female. The most common type of disability was LD with a population of 5 out of 7 students (Erten, 2011). The other disabilities included Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), mobility and cognitive difficulties, and chronic health.

Data Collection. The study was composed of three stages: recruitment of participants, focus group meetings, and data analysis (Erten, 2011). All instructors and faculty members were required to inform and invite students with disabilities to contact the OSD to participate in the study. All students registered with the OSD received an information flyer published in the electronic newsletter of the center, explaining the purpose of the project and inviting them to participate (Erten, 2011). A poster version of the same flyer was displayed on the bulletin boards at the OSD for two months. After three weeks of advertising of the study, 4 students responded by sending an e-mail to the primary researcher (Erten, 2011). First a focus group meeting was held with these 4 students. One month after the first focus group meeting, 3 more students came forth and wished to participate in the study. For that reason, a second focus group was held with new participants (Erten, 2011). The questions asked during each focus group meeting, which lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour were:

What are the experiences and perspectives of students with disabilities regarding access to and participation in university life? How can postsecondary institutions address the unique needs of students with disabilities? How do you identify with your disability? What is the major challenge of being a university student with a disability? What are your professors' and peers' perceptions of your disability? What do you think about university's support services? How would you define your ideal university? What do you think could be done to improve these issues?

(Erten, 2011, pp. 104-105).

Findings. The attitudes of the participants “reported that they had accepted their disabilities early in their lives. Five of the seven participants reported that [their] LD... created difficulties...in their academic lives” (Erten, 2011, p. 106). Self-determination skills were reported the most important factors contributing to LD students academic achievement (Erten, 2011). The support from their teachers was the determining factor in LD student’s positive school experience and academic success.

Self-Determination among College Students with Disabilities

Getzel and Thoma (2008) focused on self-determination strategies used to remain in college and successfully meet the challenges of postsecondary education. The sample was taken from 2 and 4-year colleges in Virginia. The student’s ages ranged from “18 to 48 years, with 80% of the students between the ages of 18 to 23” (Getzel & Thoma, 2008, p. 78). Of the participants, “53% were female and 47% were male” (Getzel & Thoma, 2008, p. 78). The participants came from a variety of cultural backgrounds (Caucasian, African-American, and Asian) and had a variety disabilities including visual, orthopedic, other health impairments, deafness, specific learning disability, and emotional disturbance (Getzel & Thoma, 2008). Of the 34 students, 8 students had learning disabilities. All of the students were registered with their institute’s disability center. Unfortunately, there was only 1 graduate student who participated in the study and the researcher did not specify if the 1 graduate student had a disability.

The purpose of the study was to “identify skills that effective self-advocates use to ensure they stay in college and obtain needed supports and the essential self-determination skills to remain and persist in college” (Getzel & Thoma, 2008, p. 78). The

researchers included postsecondary-level students with disabilities who were receiving support and services related to their disability and who were identified as having self-determination skills by staff in their respective DSS office. The researchers requested that the students selected for the focus groups were in good academic standing with their college or university (Getzel & Thoma, 2008).

Focus Groups. All 34 students participated in the focus groups. The focus group size ranged between 4 and 10 participants. There were two main questions asked “What do you think an effective advocate does to ensure he or she stays in school and gets the supports needed?” Themes that emerged from question one included problem solving, self-awareness, goal setting, and self-management. The second question was “What advocacy or self-determination skills do you think are absolutely essential to staying in college and getting the supports you need?” (Getzel & Thoma, 2008, pp. 80-81). The themes that emerged from the second question included seeking services on campus, forming relationships with professors and instructors, developing support systems on campus, and self-awareness.

Findings. The study looked at the 34 students with disabilities and concluded that self-determination was the most important factor in obtaining academic success. The strategies of academic success were directly from the themes that emerged from the two questions posed during the focus group, which were problem solving skills, self-awareness, setting goals, management skills, and seeking campus services (Getzel & Thoma, 2008).

Stereotypes of College Students with Learning Disabilities

May and Stone (2010) studied the reason for low self-identification rates among undergraduate and graduate students with and without learning disabilities attending two large public universities. The participants included 34 undergraduate and 4 graduate students with LD and 99 undergraduates and 1 graduate student without LD (NLD) from two Big Ten public universities (May & Stone, 2010).

Demographics. The students with learning disabilities who participated were primarily Caucasian males (n = 13) and females (n = 25); however, African American (n = 1), Asian American (n = 1), and Latino (n = 1) students participated in the study. The learning disabled students ages ranged between 18-39 years old (May & Stone, 2010).

Data Collection. The researchers recruited students through two methods. The first method was the disability center sending out an email to all students registered with the disability center on campus containing information about the study and how to contact the researchers. The second method included the researchers visiting classrooms asking students to participate in the study (May & Stone, 2010). To gather data regarding the attitudes toward individuals with LD at the college level, the researchers asked students with and without LD to respond to an open-ended metastereotype question.

Metastereotype refers to the perceived stereotype that a group of individuals believes or assumes that *others* hold about a target group. Therefore, although assessing an individual's stereotype of a target group might involve asking, "What do *you* think about a target group," assessing someone's metastereotype of a certain group might ask, "What do *people in general* think about a target group?" Thus, an assessment of attitudes toward individuals with LD that approaches the

issues by eliciting metastereotypes may yield less biased information regarding general views about these individuals (May & Stone, 2010, p. 485).

The specific open-ended questions that were posed to the participants were:

1) What are the most prevalent metastereotypes regarding individuals with LD among postsecondary students? 2) Do students with and without LD differ in terms of the metastereotypes they espouse? 3) Do students with and without LD differ in the likelihood of holding an entity view of intelligence? 4) Do students who hold entity versus incremental views of intelligence espouse different metastereotypes regarding individuals with LD? (May & Stone, 2010, pp. 486-487).

Findings. From the results of the study, LD students often felt rejected, neglected, lacking social/interpersonal skills, and tended to be disliked and unaccepted by peers and professors. The students' school and social environment contributed to the LD students' success in school. Because teachers were projecting negative thoughts of LD students, many LD students refused to disclose their disability to avoid any negative stereotypes and often resulted in being isolated (May & Stone, 2010).

College Students' Academic Identity Development Through Self-Determination

Ancil, Ishikawa, and Scott (2008) study examined 104 university students with learning disabilities and their academic journey guided by self-determination. The 104 students completed an online survey and nineteen participated in face-to-face interviews. The current study focused on the nineteen students. All of the students were registered with the disability center on campus.

Demographics. All participants were college students with documented learning

disabilities (which also included attention deficit disorder) who were receiving academic accommodations from the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at a large land-grant university in the Northwest region of the United States. The DRC independently recruited all participants through e-mail and personal communication. All interview participants received a \$25 gift certificate to either a grocery store or Starbucks (Antcil et al., 2008).

All of the students with learning disabilities (n = 289) registered with the DRC were invited, via an e-mail from the director of the DRC, to complete a Web-based self-determination survey that looked specifically at the students overall self-determination and grade point average (GPA). Of the 289 students with learning disabilities, 104 completed the survey. From the 104 survey participants, 39 met one of the five interview selection criteria. All 39 college students with learning disabilities were invited to participate, of whom 19 completed the interviews (Antcil et al., 2008).

The participants who were interviewed included 10 male and 9 female students. The majority of the students were Caucasian (17 students), one African-American, and one marked the box other (not indicating their specific ethnicity) (Antcil et al., 2008). Out of the nineteen students, thirteen were diagnosed with LD in elementary school, of which, two were identified in middle school, two in high school, and two in college. Their ages ranged from 18 to 28 years old. Their college GPA's also varied from 2.18 to 3.94 (Antcil et al., 2008).

Findings. The results from the interviews were “persistence enhances competence” (Antcil et al., 2008, p.168) (learn through mistakes, set personal goals), “acting persistently develops competence” (Antcil et al., 2008, p. 169) (important to develop identity and self-realization to understand strengths and weakness), and “self-

realization develops through persistence, competence, and career decision making” (Antcil et al., 2008, p. 171) (understanding strengths and weaknesses, self-advocating).

Faculty Attitudes and Practices of Students with Disabilities in Teacher Education

Lesyer and Greenberger (2008) examined faculty attitudes and practices regarding students with disabilities in teacher education. Participants were 188 faculty members from seven teachers training colleges in Israel who responded to a survey instrument about attitudes and practices. Demographic characteristics of the majority of the faculty members indicated an average of 46 years of age and above. Most of the faculty members had eleven and more years of teaching experience. The majority were females (69.9%) and most held a full-time position (53.5%).

A survey instrument was used to discover faculty attitudes in colleges toward students with learning disabilities and physical and sensory disabilities. The faculty members reported personal contact and extensive teaching experience with students with all types of disabilities – mainly those with learning disabilities, yet many had no training in the area of disabilities. About 60% of faculty reported having much or very much contact with individuals with learning disabilities and physical and sensory disabilities. Still a large percentage of faculty members reported having very limited contact with students with learning disabilities (Lesyer & Greenberger, 2008).

The majority (87.3%) of faculty members reported that they had taught students with disabilities in their classes. The most commonly reported disability was learning disabilities (78.2%), followed by students with ADD (42.6%), physical disabilities (33%), hearing impairments (35.1%), visual impairments (16%) and health impairments (13.8%) (Leyser & Greenberger, 2008). Exactly half of the faculty reported that they were

contacted to a large extent by students with disabilities, who asked for accommodations, about one third reported that they were not contacted or only rarely. Additionally, most (87.1%) of the faculty indicated that they were willing to respond to these requests, and 76.4% reported that they spent much extra time assisting these students (Leyser & Greenberger, 2008).

Themes in the Literature

Through examination of the relevant articles several themes emerged related to the issues college students with learning disabilities face. Although every theme was not present in each article, there were patterns that emerged demonstrating the importance of the themes described to follow. The themes will be described below and include LD students' past academic experiences, student-teacher relationships, faculty attitudes about students with disabilities, how LD students achieved academic success (e.g., study skills and self-advocacy) and support systems.

Students with Learning Disabilities Past Academic Experiences

Past experiences both negative and positive effect students' academic journey in higher education. As Orr and Goodman (2010) explain, students with learning disabilities, who have had negative academic experiences, tend to have low self-esteem. As a result, LD students have difficulty believing and acknowledging their academic achievements. They have may have constantly heard about their weaknesses and compared themselves to their classmates. Therefore, many LD students can doubt their achievements/grades, stating their academic success was based on luck not on their hard work (Erten, 2011).

On the other hand, the 19 LD students in Antcil, Ishikasa, and Scott (2008) study stated how being in resource classes and being labeled with a disability was a major factor in their determination to prove to themselves they can achieve academic success. One student stated how he was bullied as a child but now it does not bother him that it takes him twice as long to take a test, study, and read. The student no longer felt ashamed to tell his friends about his learning disability (Antcil et al., 2008). Unfortunately, the student did not elaborate on the specifics of who or what strategies he used to overcome the shamefulness of being teased as a child.

Another LD student reported looking only at her strengths, such as time management. The students also knew when to ask for help from their professors and the disability center, learned from their mistakes, prioritizing academic instead of extracurricular activities. The most inspirational comment was of one LD student who said his LD benefited him. He learned how to work hard as a child that he knows how to work hard as an adult (Antcil et al., 2008). The LD students had high levels of competence through their academic achievements.

LD Students' Request for Teachers

Erten (2011) found that students desired greater support from professors. Specifically, for professors to be more sensitive, accepting of students differences, treating students equally, have a variety of teaching/instructional methods targeting all learning styles, and supporting LD students. LD student's barriers of academic success are based on negative attitudes of teachers (Erten, 2011). How LD students are perceived affected the student's enthusiasm and participation in class. LD students reported a lack of deeper understanding from their professors of "dealing with [LD] everyday and what it

means to be always struggling” (Erten, 2011, p. 107). The students stated how they felt “misunderstood” that the professors only “provided accommodations because it is a regulation of school policy but are unaware of the policy of the disability center” (Erten, 2011, p. 107). Thus, feeling rejected, neglected, unaccepted, and disliked by their teachers (May & Stone, 2010). Because of the lack of understanding of the students’ learning disabilities, LD students were less likely to cope with new situations, were more angry and hostile towards their teachers, and had difficulty expressing themselves and their ideas.

Student-Teacher Relationships. The most successful way for professors to support LD students learning is to have a strong, positive student-teacher relationship (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Erten, 2011). By having a strong, positive relationship, LD students will be able to confide in their professor about their disability and particular needs (Erten, 2011). Forming positive relationships with professors allows LD students to feel supported academically (Getzel & Thoma, 2008). Students who are supported felt more accepted, understood, comfortable talking about their disability, increased their request for accommodations, and participated in class more (Erten, 2011).

Faculty Attitudes towards LD Students

The main source of LD students’ success is derived from faculty support; however, many educators have limited knowledge about learning disabilities and may believe LD students are incapable of learning. According to Leyser and Greenberger (2008) faculty’s explanation to their insufficient knowledge on learning disabilities was due to lack of experience teaching LD students and thus the professors seemed uncomfortable making accommodations because they viewed accommodations as

lowering their standards and giving the LD students an unfair advantage to the students without learning disabilities.

According to Leyser and Greenberger (2008), receiving accommodations in no way lowers academic standards, it simply serves LD students by supporting them in order to reach their fullest potential to succeed. As a result of professors' negative attitudes of students with LD has made many LD students refrain from disclosing their disability in order to avoid being judged, humiliated, or pitied.

Interestingly, female professors were more open to learning about learning disabilities and helping LD students succeed in their class compared to male professors. Women professors were more sympathetic and willing to go to extra lengths to support LD students. Some ways professors demonstrated support were expressing how well the student was progressing in their class and giving extra assistance to LD students (Leyser & Greenberger, 2008).

How LD Students Achieved Academic Success

The participants in the Antcil, Ishikawa, and Scott, (2008) study stated their academic success came from past failures, challenging themselves, setting goals, advocating for their rights, and knowing their strengths. Another dominant trait of students with learning disabilities achieving academic success is setting high standards/goals to prove to themselves that they are just like everyone else that they too can receive the same grades or higher as their peers and not needing any special accommodations to achieve success (Erten, 2011).

Learning disabled students reported having good internal discipline that contributed to their academic success, such as allowing sufficient time for assignments,

good organizational skills than of students without learning disabilities. LD students are more aware of distractions, areas of weakness and strengths, they have learned through trial and error, and seek assistance the moment they are struggling and/or need further explanation/clarification (Orr & Goodman, 2010).

Path to Graduation. In order to achieve academic success, many LD students took a lighter course load, which extended their time at a university by a year or two (Erten, 2011). Having a lighter course load (taking fewer classes) allowed LD students to reduce their stress and anxiety by focusing their energy on two to four classes and receiving good grades. However, LD students attained the same letter grades and grade point average as students without LD (Erten, 2011). Some strategies LD students used in Getzel and Thoma (2008) study to achieve academic success included:

Problem Solving

- Organization
- Set priorities and focus on achieving them
- Work through problems one at a time
- Form relationships with professors

Self-awareness

- Learning about oneself and one's disability (a critical factor in academic success)

Goal Setting

- Short and long term goals
- High expectations
- Self-determination

Self-management

- Allow extra time for studying
- Organizational skills (e.g., day planners, dividers with clearly labeled tabs)
- Seek assistance on campus (e.g., center for disabilities, counseling, etc.)

Study skills. Contributing factors to LD student's academic success were their study habits. LD students were masters of being organized, having meticulous note-taking skills, and using color-coded techniques and symbols as a way to highlight important information and separate sections (Antcil et al., 2008). Learning disabled students who were aware of their short-term memory deficits, rewrote their class notes as well as textbook notes to help compensate for their disability. The repetition helped LD students retain the course material. Other strategies that helped LD students achieve academic success were sitting in the front of class to avoid any distractions (Antcil et al., 2008). Learning disabled students also reported consistently going to the professor's office hours to ask for additional assistance/explanation on assignments.

Self-advocating. Self-advocacy is an essential part of LD students' academic success. Self-advocating refers to individual's ability to make decisions, establish goals, and assume responsibility for outcomes (Erten, 2011). The 19 LD students in Antcil, Ishikawa, and Scott's (2008) study had a strong understanding of their strengths, weakness, and needs, which enabled them to ask for the appropriate services (e.g., from the disability center and additional assistance from professors) to support their academic success.

Support Systems

Students with learning disabilities who had a positive and encouraging support system had higher self-esteem and motivation, which contributed to future academic

achievements (Antcil et al., 2008). In Orr and Goodman (2008) study, LD students stated how teachers were extremely influential in their academic success. The LD students mentioned how only a handful of teachers were supportive of them and gave encouraging advice. In addition to supportive faculty members, LD students stated their support systems were their friends and family members. One student stated his support from his family gave him the drive to achieve his goals (Orr & Goodman, 2008).

Given these findings from studies in the United States and Israel, attention is now turned to the current study with regard to the support for the population under investigation, students enrolled at California State University, Northridge (CSUN). The next section addresses that question beginning with the University system's guidelines and then targeting more specifically on the services at CSUN. Followed by what CSUN disability center offers students with disabilities and the prevalence of LD students enrolled at CSUN.

California State University Laws/Guidelines on LD

CSU Definition of a Learning Disability

The CSU system adheres to the definition of learning disabilities as developed by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1998). Learning disabilities is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning

disabilities but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other disabling conditions (e.g., sensory impairment, serious emotional disturbance) or with extrinsic influences (such as, cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences (adapted from NJCLD, 1998) (www.csun.edu/dres/studentservices/ld_documentation_guidelines.pdf).

Qualifications to Diagnose under the CSU System

To be considered qualified to diagnose specific learning disabilities, the professional(s) external and internal to the CSU shall have training and experience in the assessment and diagnosis of learning disabilities in adolescents and adults. Qualified professionals include clinical or educational psychologists, school psychologists, neuropsychologists, and credentialed learning disabilities specialists and other professionals whose training and experience includes the diagnostic practice of adolescents and adults.

For campuses that do not have a dedicated Learning Disability Specialist certain other professionals within the Disability Services Department, such as disability counselors or educational resource specialists, may verify the existence of a Learning Disability for the purpose of program eligibility by critical analysis of appropriate documentation submitted by an applicant if they have training and experience to do so.

All documentation must be legible, (preferably typed), presented on letterhead, dated, and signed. It must also include the professional's title, professional credentials, and/or license number as appropriate. It is not considered appropriate

or acceptable for professionals to evaluate members of their families

(www.csun.edu/dres/studentservices/ld_documentation_guidelines.pdf).

Background of the CSU Guidelines

Assessment of learning disability. In order for students to receive any accommodations or services from the disability center on California university campuses, students must obtain the proper forms and evaluations/assessments (see Appendix A).

The disability center requires the student's file, which includes historical information dating diagnosis and assessment scores stating the student indeed has a learning disability

(www.csun.edu/dres/studentservices/ld_documentation_guidelines.pdf).

The assessment process involves a wide range of the student's information including diagnostic review, evaluation of aptitude, academic achievement, information processing, clinical observations/processes, and a diagnosis (see Appendix A). From these assessments, are used to determine if a student has a learning disability

(www.csun.edu/dres/studentservices/ld_documentation_guidelines.pdf).

Diagnostic interview involves current problem(s), academic history, developmental history, medical history, psychosocial history, family history, primary home language, and student's current level of English fluency. The aptitude evaluation involves intellectual/cognitive assessments (see Appendix A). Academic achievement includes the student's current level of functioning during timed and untimed conditions. Information processing looks at a student's short-term memory, working memory, long-term memory, sequential memory, auditory and visual perception/processing, processing speed, executive functioning, and psychomotor ability (see Appendix A). In short, information processing explains the student's academic ability. Clinical observations

“measures informal assessment procedures or observations” such as test anxiety when completing timed tests

www.csun.edu/dres/student services/ld_documentation_guidelines.pdf).

Interpretation of assessments. The students’ evaluation/assessment scores show a pattern that reflects a learning disability (see Appendix A). Students with a learning disability typically fall in the average to superior range in the intellectual/cognitive ability with difficulty in one or more academic areas due to presumed underlying cognitive deficit that interferes with their performance in an academic setting (see Appendix A). The assessments show the student’s strengths, weaknesses, and functional limitations that may require the services from the disability center. The test scores also rule out poor education, poor motivation and/or study skills, emotional problems, problems of attention, and culture/language differences

www.csun.edu/dres/student services/ld_documentation_guidelines.pdf).

Recommendations for Accommodations and Support Services

It is important to recognize that needed accommodations and support services can change over time and are not always identified through an initial diagnostic process. Conversely, a prior history of accommodation(s) does not, in and of itself, warrant the provision of a similar accommodation(s). Accommodations and support services will be directly related to the diagnostic results. The final determination of appropriate and reasonable accommodations and support services rests with the CSU campus

www.csun.edu/dres/student services/ld_documentation_guidelines.pdf).

CSUN's Disability Resources and Educational Services

Currently, CSUN's Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES) offers academic support to students with learning disabilities who are registered with the DRES center (see Appendix B). Some of the services include:

- Alternative Testing (extra time, word processor, quiet room, scribe, etc.)
- Shared notes
- Alternate Media (Conversion of classroom print materials into electronic text, large print, etc.)
- Access to assistive technology
- Disability related counseling and advising
- Registration assistance (priority registration)

The most popular services among students with learning disabilities are extended time for testing and priority registration (G. Roberts-Huges, personal communications, April 18, 2012). In addition, DRES offers a variety of learning support services to encourage student's success including specialized workshops, academic coaching, disability management counseling, strengths assessment and career assistance. Academic advisement for general education courses and assistance in selecting courses is also available (G. Roberts-Huges, personal communications, April 18, 2012).

CSUN also offers a unique program for LD students, called Thriving and Achieving Program (TAP) (see Appendix B), which is dedicated to supporting the academic, personal and career success of students with disabilities (<http://www.csun.edu/dres/studentervices/tap.php>). TAP provides Academic Coaching and Strengths-Based Counseling for students registered with the DRES

center. Academic coaches encourage and support students in TAP through a combination of peer mentoring and tutoring. The coaches promote the use of strengths and talents within each student to achieve their academic goals. Strengths-Based Counseling involves the StrengthsQuest assessment, which helps identify how students can utilize their strengths in their academic journey, career search, and interpersonal relationships (<http://www.csun.edu/dres/student-services/tap.php>).

Students with Learning Disabilities at CSUN

According to Roberts-Huges, personal communications (April 18, 2012) 10% of college students have some type of learning disability. An estimated 850-950 undergraduate and graduate students are registered with California State University, Northridge Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES) (G. Roberts-Huges, personal communications, April 18, 2012).

An interesting finding about students in education. The majority of LD students have chosen majors in Liberal Studies, Child and Adolescent Development, Family Consumer Science, Psychology because of teachers who encouraged them and made a significant impact in their lives. According to Robert-Hugs, LD students have a strong desire to give back to the disability community and want to help others because they understand and sympathize with other LD students (G. Robert-Huges, personal communications, April 18, 2012). Thus, it is not surprising that the current study explores students in Educational Psychology, specifically those in Early Childhood Education.

Preview of Chapter Three

In Chapter Three the methodology of the study is described including the number of subjects who participated in the study, instrument used to collect the data, research design, and procedure.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate graduate students with learning disabilities/challenges (defined as difficulties with reading or writing or other academic tasks that have been problematic but not formally assessed) in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Master of Arts program at California State University, Northridge and how they have been successful prior and during the ECE MA program.

In order to obtain the past and present educational experiences of students with learning disabilities or challenges in the Early Childhood Education program, all currently enrolled students were asked to complete a survey. From the survey, the researcher anticipated learning what factors helped students with learning disabilities or challenges achieve academic success. This chapter describes the research and survey design as well as the methodology of the study.

Original Design to Current Design

The original design of this study utilized SurveyMonkey, an on-line tool for creating, distributing and analyzing surveys, which would be sent to current and recent alumni of the CSUN Early Childhood Education Master's Program. This proposed study, targeting alumni in particular was sent to the Standing Committee for the Protection of Human at CSUN and was approved. However, out of 300 students who were emailed the survey, only 3 students completed it! Therefore, this design was modified to increase the likelihood of collecting measurable data. As such, a paper copy of the survey was created which was geared toward current students, not alumni, with modifications to some of the

questions. This revised method and survey was developed and approved by the CSUN Standing Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects on September 28, 2012 (see Appendix C).

The survey questions were geared towards students with a learning disability/challenge and how their learning disability may or may not have influenced their academic success in the ECE MA program. The researcher's intended purpose of the study was to find out approximately how many LD students are in the program and to gather information on ways to strengthen the program to better meet their needs, based on their description of their experiences and feedback.

Sample

The following information was gathered from the demographic questions on the survey. All of the students currently enrolled in the ECE MA program are women; however, one respondent may have inadvertently marked the wrong box for gender but was nevertheless coded as female based on all appearances. While it is possible there may be a transgender person, this has not been apparent.

Age. The ages of the participants varied. Four noting they were between the ages of 26-29 and two noting they were between 50-54. Furthermore, there was one student in each of the following age categories: 22-25, 30-33, 34-37, and 42-45.

Ethnicity. A large number of the participants were White, non-Hispanic (n = 5), followed by Latino/Hispanic (n = 4), African-American (n = 1), and other (n = 1).

Primary language. More than half of the students' primary language was English only (n = 6); English/Spanish (n = 2); Spanish only (n = 2); and other (n = 1).

Financial aid. Nearly all of the students reported they do not receive any financial aid (n = 7). The remaining four students stated they receive financial aid.

Employment. Almost all of the students stated having a full-time job in an early childcare setting (n = 9). One student has a part-time job unrelated to children but volunteered in a childcare setting and one student was not employed.

Health. All of the students reported suffering from mild to severe health related issues while enrolled in the ECE MA program at CSUN. The students stated their stress contributed to insufficient sleep, anxiety, poor diet, and the common cold/flu. One student mentioned her stress level from the MA program caused Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) and another student was diagnosed with Fibromyalgia. Two different students were going through a divorce. One student went into premature labor during her time in the program (Fall, 2012). Another student reported going through traumatic life events during the program. Only two students stated they have “good health” one of which is currently pregnant.

Education. The majority of students with learning disabilities/challenges had undergraduate grade point average (GPA) of 4.0-3.8 (n = 4); 3.7-3.5 (n = 3); 3.4-3.2 (n = 2); and two students stated that they had a less than 2.9. Many of the students who completed the survey that identified as having a learning disability/challenges are currently in their first semester in the program. Because most of the students are in their first semester, they do not have a graduate GPA, so they did not answer this question. The following students who did answer the question hold a 4.0-3.8 GPA (n = 4), 3.7-3.5 (n = 1), less than 2.9 (n = 1).

Furthermore, five students are in their first semester, two students are in their third, two students in their fifth semester, and one student in their second and one student in their fourth semester. Expected graduation date 2013 (n = 5); 2014 (n = 2); 2015 (n = 2); two did not write when they think they might graduate.

Family responsibilities. Five of the eleven students reported that their number one responsibility is taking care of themselves, four students stated that they care for themselves, their husband and children, and finally the remaining two students family responsibilities included their children and themselves.

Procedure

The current survey was distributed to all current students enrolled in the ECE MA program. All of the students were given a consent form regarding the purpose of the study and the significance of their participation (see Appendices D and E). Three professors, each with a class representing primarily first, second, and third year students, distributed the survey to their students. As a result, 24 students enrolled in EPC 634 – Language and Concept Development in The Early School Years, including mostly first year with a few second year students and one 5th semester person responded in this group. In addition, 9 of students enrolled in EPC 683 – Collaboration with Families in Education Settings completed the survey were second year students. Finally, 7 surveys were collected from third year students in EPC 696 – Directed Graduate Research. Although the survey was distributed to three classes with approximately 50 students total, it was expected that only a portion of all students would disclose that they have a learning disability/challenges. In the end, a total of 40 surveys were collected and of those, 11 students identified themselves as having a learning disability/challenge. The results

reported in the study will be based solely on these 11 students. However, the data of the entire population will be used for additional research (Rothstein-Fisch, Hartwig, & Perez, as approved by the Standing Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects).

Instrument

The survey consisted of a series of questions including age, demographic, health, gender, GPA, past school experience, support systems, ways to improve the ECE program (what professors can do to better support students with learning disabilities), reasons or experiences lead them to attend the CSUN ECE program, (majoring in education), and strategies that helped them compensate for their disability (see Appendix C). The survey asked if students had a known learning disability or if they think they have special learning challenges, but have not been formally assessed. The 11 students were strongly encouraged to elaborate on their academic experiences. The survey questions included the students' general information, demographic, and open-ended questions based on their academic experiences and coping techniques.

It was important to ask these questions to gain a better understanding of the student's academic experiences and gather data on how many students have learning disabilities/challenges are enrolled in the program. The open-ended questions included type of learning disability (when the student was diagnosed and how has it impacted the student academically past and present), English proficiency, studying techniques, types of support and coping methods, advice to future students with learning disability or challenges to succeed in graduate school, and finally if they learned anything about themselves from completing the survey. To ensure confidentiality, the completed surveys

were stored at the researcher's home in a locked box. The students were not compensated for their participation.

Preview of Chapter Four

The next chapter will describe the results of the survey, including the participants' responses, common themes including type of learning disability or challenge, support, used to achieve academic success.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This study examines the academic journey of students with learning disabilities or challenges that lead them to enrolling in the Early Childhood Education Master of Arts program at California State University, Northridge. In this chapter, the participants' responses from the survey are analyzed and categorized by the questions in the survey.

Sample

A total of 40 students completed the survey; however, for this study, the researcher only analyzed the students who were either formally diagnosed or suspected they have learning challenges (n = 11). The rest of the surveys were not included in this study; however it is worthwhile to note that of the total respondents, 28% identified themselves with learning challenges. All of the students who completed the survey were outwardly female, with the possible exception of a respondent who marked M (for male) on the survey (which is believed an error) but is possible the student is transgender. Only two students were formally diagnosed with learning disabilities and nine students identified themselves as having learning challenges that hinder their academic learning.

Formal Diagnosis of Learning Disability

Although 11 students completed the survey noting they have a learning disability or challenge, only two students were formally diagnosed with a learning disability. One student was identified in Argentina in the 2nd grade. Her specific learning disability is "ADHD, reading comprehension, and auditory processing." In the sub question, "In what ways does it [learning disability] impact you?" She wrote, "Now I learned to cope with it.

At times [it] takes longer to comprehend things I read. As for ADHD, I just have to stay busy.” She is not currently enrolled in the disability center on campus. In the next question, “Reflecting back on your past educational experiences, in what ways have you been impacted by your learning disability?” She responded by stating that “it hasn’t” and that “my mom did a great job in not letting me be affected by it.”

The second student was formally diagnosed with a learning disability in 2009, stating that she has difficulty with “working memory – information goes in but does not always cross over (missing sparkplug).” In response to the sub question, “In what ways does it [LD] impact you?” she mentioned that she gets “very frustrated in class because I forget some information I need [to] contribute. It also takes me a very long time to study for tests.” She is the only student registered with the Disability Resource and Educational Services (DRES) center on campus. The final question, “reflecting back on your past educational experiences, in what ways have you been impacted by your learning disability?” She wrote, “it has empowered me because I know if I push myself hard enough, I will be successful in school.”

Undiagnosed Learning Disabilities or Challenges

The other students who believed that they have either one or multiple learning disabilities or challenges, which included Attention Deficit Disorder (n = 5), auditory processing (n = 2), sensory processing disorder (n = 2), short-term memory (n = 1), math processing (n = 1), and speech issues (n = 1). The following section describes each of the eleven students responses to the survey questions. The majority of the students did not elaborate on their suspected learning disability or challenge and how it has affected their academic success.

Undergraduate Experience

A couple (n = 2) of students reported their undergraduate experience was “easy.” One of the two students stated her undergraduate assignments were “easy” and there was “not much reading or writing.” Other students felt that they learned a great deal and enjoyed their undergraduate experience (n = 5). However, one student expressed that her undergraduate experience did not properly “prepare for graduate school.” Another student who had an “exceptional experience” also stated that the “courses were repetitive” and the “topics were more theoretical and did not have enough everyday application.” Interestingly, student stated that her community college was more challenging than her undergraduate work at California State University, Northridge. None of the students made any connection between their undergraduate experiences and their learning disability or challenge.

Choice of the ECE MA Program

More than half (n = 7) of the students’ reason for attending CSUN’s ECE MA program was to gain more knowledge in the education field so they have more job opportunities and increase in their salary. Other students’ reasons for enrolling in the program included being recommended by their co-workers and employers (n = 3). Interestingly, one student noted that CSUN’s ECE program was the “only ECE program locally” and another student stated that CSUN’s tuition was more “attractive than private university.”

Current academic experience in the ECE program. All of the students had positive remarks to say about their current academic experience in the ECE program. Most of the students wrote the program has been, positive, rewarding, supportive, and

successful. Other students stated they have enjoyed expanding their knowledge that they can apply to their personal and professional lives. One student wrote how she “likes being held to a higher standard.” The majority of the students wrote positive comments about their academic experience in the program. One student who stated that the program has been “overwhelming.” A couple (n = 2) of students stated it has been challenging to balance schoolwork and a full-time job. One student had to drop a class because of the combination of schoolwork and her job.

Disclosed learning disability/challenge with professors. Only two students disclosed their learning disabilities/challenges with their ECE professors. One student’s reason for sharing her disability/challenge was “I knew my ECE teachers would understand and empathize with my challenges. They have been great!” The other student shared her learning disability with some of her professors, not all of them. She stated, “I try to succeed on my own.” Some of the reasons why the students did not share their learning disabilities/challenges were because they have learned to cope/manage their disability.

Support from the ECE professors. Interestingly, some (n = 4) students who did not share their disability with their professors noted that the professors “have been very helpful and supportive.” The two students who disclosed their learning disability/challenge with their professors wrote, “To the ones I shared, most have been supportive. One said that maybe I was doing too much.” The other student wrote, “not much support has been needed except for recognition.” Interestingly, one student who wrote that she did not share her learning disability or challenge with her professors wrote

that one of her professors suggested “different methods to read material and finish assignments.”

Perception of learning disability/challenge since entering graduate school.

The students’ responses varied on their outlook of their learning disability/challenge since entering graduate school. One student stated that she has a “better outlook on myself and children like me.” While another student described the program has been “frustrating but I expected that and hope to adapt.” One student wrote, “I was successful before and am now.” From the program two students recognized that she “can better regulate myself” and the other student stated she is “forced to be organized and focused.”

Improve the ECE program to better support LD. A few (n = 3) students noted the professors have been “great” and “supportive” and did not give suggestions to improve the program to better support students with learning disabilities/challenges. Only two students requested “academic counseling” and “different teaching styles” to accommodate students with learning disabilities/challenges.

English proficiency. To the question “How would you describe your English proficiency? What are your language strengths and areas for growth potential? What are you doing to address your developmental needs in Standard English (academic English – that include vocabulary, grammar, spelling, syntax, and pragmatics)?” About half of the 11 students (n = 6) reported their English proficiency was “excellent” or “good.” A few (n = 3) students mentioned areas of improvement were “grammar and syntax.” Other areas of improvement included “sentence structure”, “spelling”, and one student wrote, “being confident in my writing/reading.” Only a couple of students were addressing their

areas of weakness. One student stated she has “a tutor.” The other student noted she “takes the feedback from my TA’s and revise my work as many times as possible.”

Success in Graduate School

The students wrote multiple factors that contributed to their academic success. The majority (n = 3) of the students noted their classmates/peers/friends and their husbands/fiancé (n = 6) supported them and helped them succeed. Other contributing factors to the students’ academic success included the Early Childhood Education TA’s (n = 2), alumni of the Early Childhood Education program (n = 1), Early Childhood Education professors, and tutors at California State University.

Coping methods and support systems. The most popular form of coping method that helped the students with LD/learning challenges succeed were their spouses (n = 5). Other forms of coping methods included friends, exercise, pets, children, other family members, faith, therapy, journaling, talking with classmates, former graduates of the ECE program, and co-workers.

Strategies

To learn how LD students achieved academic success, it was important to know what study methods they used. The question on study strategies included specific areas relating to the ECE program, which included:

Reading the books/academic source material with comprehension. In response to effective study strategies regarding reading the course material, several students (n = 5) noted adequate time, re-reading, and taking lots of notes. Other forms included “highlighting,” “asking questions,” “looking up [new] words,” and “relating the material to real life experiences.”

Learning new and difficult vocabulary, theories or research principles. The students wrote similar techniques for learning new and difficult information as strategies that they have developed to achieve academic success. A few (n = 3) students reported methods for learning new and difficult vocabulary was “re-writing” the words, “looking up the definition” and “try to use it in a sentence.” Other methods included “study longer,” “taking lots of notes, and asking questions,” “going to class, reading slowly, and study groups.” Two students mentioned they connect new words and theories “to other theories or principles and daily life.”

Preparing for tests. The most popular and effective forms of preparing for tests were study groups, re-reading and re-writing notes, and study in advance make (n = 6). Another student noted using “flash cards and acronyms” to remember words and concepts. An important strategy one student wrote when preparing for tests is “understanding concepts rather than memorizing words and explaining concepts out loud to myself.”

Writing papers and American Psychological Association (APA) referencing. The students noted useful strategies for writing papers in APA style, which included referencing the APA manual and on-line resources (e.g., owl.english.purdue.edu) (n = 3), refer to old papers and comments from the TA’s and professors (n = 2), and re-reading and editing their papers several times and asking friends, classmates, spouses, and other family members to read and edit their work (n = 5).

Group projects. To the question, effective strategies with group projects, there were a low number of responses (n = 2) because most of the coursework in the ECE MA program is completed independently. The two students who answered the question noted

when working in groups it is important to have “good communication” and “assign responsibilities to everyone in the group.”

Advice to students with learning disabilities/challenges

The students with learning disabilities or challenges offered powerful messages to future students including: “To not be discouraged and never give up.” “Be honest about [your disability] and accept help” “believe in yourself.” “Identify your weakness and strengths and figure out how to use your strengths to counter balance your weakness.” Additional advice included having a strong support system (n = 2).

Reflection

The final survey question queried if by completing the survey, the student learned anything about themselves (e.g., reflecting on their academic accomplishments despite their learning disability or challenge). Of the 11 students only 4 students answered the final question of the survey, which was if they learned anything about themselves from completing the survey. One student wrote, “yes” underneath the question but did not elaborate. Another student who was formally diagnosed with a learning disability expressed, “How strong my mom made me and how strong I am in overcoming...obstacles.” The third student raved about the ECE program. The program has “challenged” her and “opened [her] eyes to more in the ECE field” and “like[s] research!”

Synthesis

The results from the survey supported the past research/studies on graduate students with learning disabilities described in Chapter Two. Some similarities of the past research and responses from this study include type of learning disability, type of support

system, study techniques, and determination to succeed without the help of professors and the disability center on campus.

Other similarities of the 11 students to past research/studies include type of support and struggles. Some struggles included the amount of time to study, write papers, and learn new information. In Chapter Two, the literature review revealed that many students reported having positive relationships with their professors contributed to their academic success. In this study, nearly all of the students noted they felt supported (e.g., academically and in regard to their disability or challenge) by their professors. However, the students main source of support (e.g., emotional) came from the student's spouse, parent(s), and other family members.

Again, like most LD students in past studies, only 2 of the 11 students shared their disability with their professors and only one used the services provided by the disability center on campus. One student's reasoning for not disclosing her disability and not registering with the disability center was that she "honestly does not see it as a disability. I don't want to give myself that excuse." Another student reported, "I try to succeed on my own." These two students received high honors and grade point average in undergraduate school and pushed themselves to succeed academically.

A surprising outcome from the survey was the high number of students who believed they have Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) though this is undiagnosed. Other students described characteristics of ADD, such as lack of focus and concentration and unable to sit still for long periods of time. Another interesting outcome from the survey was none of the students reported any negative academic experiences. In the studies reviewed in Chapter Two, other authors cited students' internal motivation as derived

from past negative experiences. The 11 students did not discuss any past failures or negative experiences. The students emphasized on what strategies they use to achieve academic success.

Preview of Chapter Five

Chapter five summarizes the findings of the survey, implications and conclusions of the study, and further research on learning disabilities.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Summary

The purpose of this study was to discover how many students in the Early Childhood Education Master of Arts program at California State University, Northridge have been formally diagnosed with a learning disability or suspect they have learning challenges and what their academic journey has been like coping and managing their disability through graduate school. As discussed in previous chapters, learning disabilities (LD) hinder students' brain function or processing. Thus, students with a learning disability or a learning/processing challenge, often work twice as hard to learn and retain information. For students with learning disabilities, academic success is based on excellent study skills and a strong support system.

Discussion

Like the studies reviewed in Chapter Two, students with learning disabilities/challenges enrolled in the Early Childhood Education MA program at CSUN described a strong determination to achieve academic success. The 11 students reported their academic achievements were a result of long hours studying and having supportive family, friends, and professors similarly to that found in the study by Getzel and Thoma (2008). Likewise, the number one disability among the Early Childhood Education Master of Arts students paralleled the general college students reviewed: learning disabilities (Leyser & Greenberger, 2008; Orr & Goodman, 2010). This study had a remarkable 28% of students who were diagnosed with a learning disability or considered themselves to have a learning challenge. This is significant because there is a large

population of students who have difficulty processing or learning new information. Thus it is important for professors to be aware of because there may be a quarter of their students with learning challenges.

One significant difference between the studies reviewed and the responses from this study was that none of the 11 students reported negative academic experiences. Orr & Goodman (2010); Erten (2011) and Anctil, Ishikawa, & Scott (2008) described LD students negative past academic experiences. The outcome of the 11 students may have been different if the questions were posed through one-on-one interviews, providing students with queries about past experiences that may have had a negative impact.

Limitations

It is believed the students would have given a more detailed response to the survey questions if either the researcher personally distributed the survey and asked for as many examples or ideas as possible for each question. The opportunity to conduct one-to-one interviews with students who were diagnosed with a learning disability or suspect they have learning challenges would have been an excellent additional data source. An interview in person or by telephone may have resulted in a more personal conversation, probing the student with more details about their academic experiences.

Another limitation was having a small sample size. The researcher distributed the survey to the ECE MA program based on convenience; however, the ECE program is a relatively small program and small class sizes; therefore resulting in a small sample. It would have been interesting to know how many LD students are enrolled in the entire Education Psychology and Counseling (EPC) department, which would have given a much more substantial conclusion. Another issue was distributing the survey in the ECE

classes. Because the majority of the ECE students were in their first year, there were not significant results of academic success at the graduate level from more than one semester.

Future Research

Training Educations about Learning Disabilities

In order for students to receive accommodations at universities, general education teachers must be able to identify students who show characteristics of a learning disability and refer students to the disability center to be formally diagnosed. Many teachers are unaware of the characteristics of learning disabilities and therefore, many students may not be able to achieve at their highest level. Among CSUN students, it has been found that men have a much lower rate of completion and a much lower rate of asking for help when they need it (Huber, 2011) thus, although the current study includes only women in Early Childhood, there may be some relevance to the success of these particular graduate students who are in a relationships-based field and may be better at asking for help from others to study or edit their work.

Issues with Unidentified Students who Struggle in School

These unidentified students struggle in school having to figure out strategies to help them succeed in school without the support from the disability center. The DSM-V has reported the following characteristics of students with learning disabilities (Kupfer & Regier, 2012):

1. Inaccurate or slow and effortful word reading.
2. Difficulty understanding the meaning of what is read (e.g., may read text accurately but not understand the sequence, relationships, inferences, or deeper meanings of what is read).

3. Poor spelling (e.g., may add, omit, or substitute vowels or consonants).
4. Poor written expression (e.g., makes multiple grammatical or punctuation errors within sentences, written expression of ideas lack clarity, poor paragraph organization, or excessively poor handwriting).
5. Difficulties remembering number facts.
6. Inaccurate or slow arithmetic calculation.
7. Ineffective or inaccurate mathematical reasoning.
8. Avoidance of activities requiring reading, spelling, writing, or arithmetic.

Because of the rise in students with learning disabilities enrolling in universities, educators should be aware of the common struggles LD students face on a daily basis and knowledgeable of different strategies to teach to LD students (e.g., different teaching styles, classroom environment, and establishing a positive and supportive relationship with LD students). An efficient way to teach educators about learning disabilities are for educators be required to attend seminars or workshops about learning disabilities that include information on learning disabilities and the importance of being sympathetic, understanding, patient, and encouraging to students with learning disabilities. The more knowledge educators have about learning disabilities, the easier educators can identify students with LD and therefore, support their learning. For example, faculty might benefit from an engaging, on-line Ted-Talk style description of students with learning challenges and some brief testimonials from faculty (and their successful students) who have made positive changes on each other's learning and teaching.

A final recommendation, which has proven effective (G. Roberts-Huges, personal communications, April 18, 2012), is for current students with learning disabilities to share their success stories with elementary, junior high, and high school students. Students with learning disabilities who share their experiences and strategies that helped them achieve a master's degree could foster a new generation of achievers! Mentoring programs can boost college student's self-esteem and younger students with learning disabilities to continue onto higher education.

Implications of the study

From the interview with the DRES counselor, many students with learning disabilities often chose their career working with students with disabilities because they can relate and have a strong desire to help and mentor students with disabilities (G. Roberts-Huges, personal communications, April 18, 2012). The majority of the 11 students stated they are early childhood teachers. None of the 11 students stated their learning disability/challenge interferes with their ability to teach children. From the students' responses, I assume the students feel it is more challenging to be a student than to be a teacher. For example, many of the students who are either diagnosed or believe they have attention deficit disorder (which makes sitting and concentrating in class challenging) can be a big asset for teachers who are moving around, constantly planning and watching children. They might be inclined to be lively and engaging with young children.

As might often be the case, people select career pathways based on their strengths. Early childhood education professionals who are strong in building meaningful relationships (such as with supportive professors or family) will be well-

suited for Early Childhood. The new Early Childhood Education Competencies (California Department of Education, 2011) includes a competency for Relationships, Interactions, and Guidance as well as Observation and Screening with a goal to detect learning or other challenges in young children for optimal outcomes. It is no surprise that people, with the strength of persistence, perseverance, and excellent relationship skills would be drawn to Early Childhood Education.

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Appendix A: CSU LD Guidelines

Appendix A is from:

www.csun.edu/dres/student services/ld_documentation_guidelines.pdf

The California State University prohibits unlawful discrimination against students on the basis of disability in its programs, services, and activities, in accordance with the Sections 504 & 508 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended; Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 Title 2 (ADA), as amended; applicable state laws and regulations including Fair Employment & Housing Law-Disability Chapter; and pursuant to the California State University “Policy for the Provision of Accommodations and Support Services to Students with Disabilities” (2008, hereafter referred to as CSU Policy). Guidelines for the assessment and verification of students with learning disabilities for the purpose of providing accommodations and support services are presented in this document, “California State University Guidelines for the Assessment and Verification of Students with Learning Disabilities” (hereafter referred to as CSU Guidelines). The CSU Guidelines are designed to provide an equal educational opportunity to students with learning disabilities who are otherwise qualified for admission. The guidelines are based on consultation with qualified professionals in the field of learning disabilities in the CSU and other state university systems and are consistent with those issued by nationally known professional organizations [e. g., AHEAD]. These CSU Guidelines supersede eligibility criteria issued by the Office of the Chancellor in 2002. If any of the laws and regulations upon which the CSU Guidelines are based as amended, the most current applicable laws and regulations shall apply.

I. CSU Definition of a Learning Disability

The CSU system adheres to the definition of learning disabilities as developed by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1998). Learning disabilities is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other disabling conditions (e. g., sensory impairment, serious emotional disturbance) or with extrinsic influences (such as, cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences (adapted from NJCLD, 1998).

II. Qualifications to Diagnose

To be considered qualified to diagnose specific learning disabilities, the professional(s) external and internal to the CSU shall have training and experience in the assessment and diagnosis of learning disabilities in adolescents and adults. Qualified professionals include clinical or educational psychologists, school psychologists, neuropsychologists, and credentialed learning disabilities specialists and other professionals whose training and experience includes the diagnostic practice of adolescents and adults.

For campuses that do not have a dedicated Learning Disability Specialist certain other professionals within the Disability Services Department, such as disability

counselors or educational resource specialists, may verify the existence of a Learning Disability for the purpose of program eligibility by critical analysis of appropriate documentation submitted by an applicant if they have training and experience to do so. All documentation must be legible, (preferably typed), presented on letterhead, dated, and signed. It must also include the professional's title, professional credentials, and/or license number as appropriate. It is not considered appropriate or acceptable for professionals to evaluate members of their families.

III. Assessment and Substantiation of a Learning Disability

A. Background

The guidelines for the appropriate elements of assessment and verification of students with learning disabilities are consistent with the AHEAD Guidelines (2008) and the CSU Policy for the Provision of Accommodations and Support Services to Students with Disabilities (2008). Documentation should validate the need for accommodations and support services based on the student's current level of functioning in the educational setting. A school plan, such as an individualized education program (IEP) or a 504 plan is insufficient documentation but may be included as historical information in a more comprehensive assessment battery.

Confidential records will be protected in accordance with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA, 2001) and its regulations as stated in the CSU Policy: Each CSU campus shall maintain appropriate confidential records that identify students with disabilities. These records shall include the student's name, address, campus student identification number, nature of disability, support services needed, and verifying statement of the director or designee of services to student with disabilities, and any

documentation provided by the student. All such records, including student medical records, shall be considered “education records” protected by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) and its regulations. Although certain medical records are exempt from FERPA’s definition of “education records,” that exemption does not apply to student medical records maintained by a campus program for services to students with disabilities. Accordingly, confidential records will be protected in accordance with FERPA regulations with the purpose of providing appropriate academic accommodations or support services. Information about the student may be released with the student’s informed written consent in accordance with FERPA or other applicable legislation. Reasonable accommodations are based on the current impact of the disability on academic performance. In most cases this means that a diagnostic evaluation should be age appropriate and relevant to the student's learning environment, and show the student's current level of functioning. (AHEAD 2008).

B. Assessment Process

The proper diagnosis of a learning disability involves an orderly, deductive process during which a wide range of information must be considered. Reliance on a single test instrument, no matter how comprehensive it appears, may be misleading. A comprehensive assessment and the resulting diagnostic report must include a diagnostic interview, evaluation of aptitude, academic achievement, information processing, clinical observations/processes and a diagnosis. Other possible reasons for the learning difficulties need to be discussed and ruled out where appropriate. Tests scores including standard scores, index scores, cluster scores and percentiles should be included with the report.

1. Diagnostic Interview

The assessment of learning disabilities requires a comprehensive diagnostic interview. Relevant information from across a lifespan should include the following areas: presenting problem(s), academic history, developmental history, medical history, psychosocial history, family history, primary language of the home, student's current level of English fluency, any other existing diagnosis(es), and medications, past and present. During the interview, the professional will explore possible alternative explanations for the presenting problem(s) other than learning disabilities.

2. Testing Process

When selecting a battery of tests, it is critical to consider the technical adequacy of instruments, including their reliability, validity, and standardization on an appropriate norm group. It is essential for the evaluator to utilize appropriate judgment in the selection of the assessment instruments utilized. The following is a suggested list of assessment instruments for the assessment of students suspected of having a learning disability. This list is not intended to be definitive or exhaustive.

a. Aptitude/Cognitive Ability

Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-Third Edition (WAIS-III)

Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-Fourth Edition (WAIS-IV)

Woodcock-Johnson-Third Edition: Tests of Cognitive Ability (WJ-III)

Kaufman Adolescent and Adult Intelligence Test

Reynolds Intellectual Assessment Scale (RIAS)

Stanford-Binet (SB5)

Test of Non-Verbal Intelligence (TONI-3)

b. Academic Achievement

Woodcock-Johnson-Third Edition: Tests of Achievement (WJ-III)

Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT-III)

Or specific achievement tests such as:

Nelson-Denny Reading Skills Test (Form G& H)

Stanford Diagnostic Mathematics Test

Test of Written Language-3 (TOWL-3)

Gray Oral Reading Test (GORT 4th ed.)

Spadafore Diagnostic Reading Test

Specific achievement tests are useful instruments when administered under standardized conditions and when the results are interpreted within the context of other diagnostic information. For example, the Wide Range Achievement Test-3 or 4 (WRAT-3 or 4) is not a comprehensive measure of achievement and, therefore, should not be used as the sole measure of achievement.

c. Information Processing

Acceptable instruments include, but are not limited to:

Wechsler Memory Scale

Rey Osterrieth Complex Figure

Trails A & B

Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Third Edition (PPVT-III)

Rey Auditory Verbal Learning Test

Bender Visual-Motor Gestalt Test

Beery Visual-Motor Integration Test

Wisconsin Card Sorting Test

The testing process should utilize current, technically adequate and appropriate standardized instruments and should be based on a thorough examination of the student in the following areas. Any revisions or successors to the tests listed above would be included upon publication.

3. Factors to be Measured by the Assessment

a. Aptitude:

A complete and comprehensive intellectual/cognitive assessment is required. Students with learning disabilities enrolled at the university level characteristically display average to superior intelligence and significant intra-cognitive discrepancies.

b. Academic Achievement:

A comprehensive academic achievement battery is essential, including current levels of academic functioning (under timed and un-timed conditions) in relevant areas such as reading decoding and comprehension, mathematics, oral language, and written language.

c. Information Processing:

Specific areas of information processing (e. g., short-term memory, working memory, long-term memory, sequential memory, auditory and visual perception/processing, processing speed, executive functioning, psychomotor ability) should be assessed as the information processing deficit and it must have the logical nexus that explains the academic difficulty.

d. Clinical Observations:

Other assessment instruments, such as non-standardized measures and informal assessment procedures or observations, may be helpful in determining performance

across a variety of domains. In addition to standardized tests, clinical observations are essential to the assessment. It may also be useful to include information derived from “testing to the limits.”

4. Test Scores

All subtests, factor, index, and cluster scores should be reported and considered when making a diagnosis. Standard scores and percentiles should be provided for all normed measures when intrinsic to the instrument. Whenever possible, age-based scores are preferred for an adult population; grade or age equivalent scores alone are not useful.

5. Interpretation

Assessment instruments and the data they provide do not diagnose; rather, they provide important elements that must be integrated by the evaluator with background information, observations of the client during the testing situation, and the current context. It is essential, therefore, that professional judgment be utilized in all cases. An indication of how patterns in the student’s cognitive ability, achievement, and information processing reflect the presence of a learning disability is critical. The particular profile of the student’s strengths and weaknesses must be shown to relate to functional limitations that may necessitate accommodations and support services. Moreover, it is critical that the evaluator has ruled out alternative explanations for academic problems, such as those resulting from poor education, poor motivation and/or study skills, emotional problems, problems of attention, and cultural/language differences.

Students with learning disabilities typically fall in the Average to Very Superior range intellectual/cognitive ability with difficulty in one or more academic areas due to a presumed underlying cognitive deficit that interferes with their performance in an

academic setting. Eligibility criteria for learning disability support services should be in line with the following specific guidelines.

a. Significant intra-cognitive discrepancy (ies) of at least one standard deviation as measured by technically adequate, standardized instruments of aptitude (e. g., Verbal Comprehension vs. Perceptual Organization, Verbal Comprehension vs. Working Memory on the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-Fourth Edition (WAIS-IV).

Students with learning disabilities characteristically display significant Intra-cognitive scatter as compared to students without learning disabilities.

OR

b. Significant aptitude-achievement discrepancy (ies) at least one standard deviation as measured by technically adequate, standardized instruments of aptitude (e. g., Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-Fourth Edition, Woodcock-Johnson-Third Edition Tests of Cognitive Abilities and Woodcock-Johnson Third Edition Tests of Achievement).

This component refers to the difference between students' predicted ability levels and their assessed achievements levels (e. g. Factor Scores on the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-Fourth Edition vs. Reading decoding, Reading comprehension, Math calculation, Math applications scores on the Woodcock-Johnson-Third Edition).

Students with learning disabilities characteristically illustrate a significant aptitude-achievement discrepancy (ies).

AND

c. At least one standard score in the Average Range, or above of aptitude (i.e., Standard Score =90 or above / 25th percentile or above) as measured by technically adequate, standardized instruments of aptitude.

AND

d. An average or greater score (i.e., Standard Score =90 or above / 25th percentile or above) in at least one academic area as measured by technically adequate, standardized instruments of achievement.

OR

e. Professional Certification.

To address the possibility that a student with a learning disability may not be identified by standard diagnostic procedures, clinical judgment may be exercised in up to 10% of all students tested during an academic year. Recognizing that currently available assessment instruments may be biased when utilized with individuals who have cultural/language differences, the percentage of students who may be determined eligible on the basis of clinical judgment may be increased when the population of students assessed includes large numbers of such students.

4. Diagnosis and Summary

All of the aforementioned information should lead to a written diagnostic summary regarding the presence or absence of a learning disability(ies). This summary should include specific recommendations for accommodations and support services, as well as an explanation as to why such accommodations and support services are recommended. The evaluator should support recommendations with specific test results and/or clinical observations.

5. Prior Verification

Flexibility in accepting documentation is important, especially in settings with significant numbers of non-traditional students. In some instances, documentation may be

outdated or inadequate in scope or content. In other instances, it may not address the student's current level of functioning or need for accommodations and support services because observed changes may have occurred in the student's performance since the previous assessment was conducted. Testing/evaluation results should generally be dated no more than three (3) for high school students and five years (5) for adults.

Consequently, it may be appropriate for a qualified professional to update the evaluation report. The purpose of this update is to determine the student's current need for accommodations and support services and should include a rationale for ongoing accommodations and support services.

In order to receive accommodations and support services, prior verification must meet the same guidelines as outlined previously. A diagnosis of a learning disability documented by a qualified professional (whether in private practice or in a previous school setting) does not automatically guarantee that identical accommodations and support services will be provided.

Documentation for students who have been determined eligible for accommodations and support services according to the criteria established by the California Community College system will be reviewed in accordance with the above prescribed CSU methodology and criteria.

If accommodations and support services are not clearly identified and supported by history and test results, the CSU will seek clarification and more information. The final determination for providing appropriate and reasonable accommodations and support services rests with the CSU campus.

6. Recommendations for Accommodations and Support Services

It is important to recognize that needed accommodations and support services can change over time and are not always identified through an initial diagnostic process. Conversely, a prior history of accommodation(s) does not, in and of itself, warrant the provision of a similar accommodation(s). Accommodations and support services will be directly related to the diagnostic results. The final determination of appropriate and reasonable accommodations and support services rests with the CSU campus.

Student Appeal Process

Pursuant to Section 504 and the ADA, students with disabilities who are denied a requested accommodation may appeal the decision through on-campus informal and formal accommodation dispute resolution processes.

Appendix B: DRES LD Information

Appendix B is from: <http://www.csun.edu/dres/student-services/tap.php>

California State University, Northridge Disability Resources and Educational Services center (DRES) offers students with learning support services and accommodations. DRES offers accommodations that ensure access to academic and services that support learning. The following is a list of some of the accommodations for which students may be eligible:

- Alternative Testing (extra time, word processor, quiet room, scribe, etc.)
- Shared notes
- Alternate Media (Conversion of classroom print materials into electronic text, Braille, large print, etc.)
- Access to assistive technology
- Accessible classroom furniture (ergonomic chair, height adjustable table, etc.)
- Disability related counseling and advising
- Registration assistance

In addition, DRES also offers a variety of learning support services to encourage your success including specialized workshops, academic coaching, disability management counseling, strengths assessment and career assistance. Academic advisement for general education courses and assistance in selecting courses is also available. Our counselors assist students in selecting courses when disability accommodations are needed; however, academic advisement must be conducted through your major's department office. Even if you did not register for services when you first

began at California State University, Northridge you are welcome at any point in your academic career to schedule an appointment and begin the registration process.

CSUN's disability center has a The Thriving and Achieving Program (TAP) is dedicated to supporting the academic, personal and career success of students with disabilities. The program's staff consists of professionals and specialists who work collaboratively with students who have physical, mental health and learning disabilities.

TAP Provides:

1. Academic Coaching - Academic coaches encourage and support students in TAP through a combination of peer mentoring and tutoring. Academic coaches encourage and support students in TAP through a combination of peer mentoring and tutoring. The coaches promote the use of strengths and talents within each student to achieve their academic goals. Students are able to enrich their college experience through empowerment and self-advocacy and grow to become life-long independent learners.

Struggling with?

- Understanding what you are reading
- Remembering information you are sure you have studied
- Keeping track of assignment due dates
- Writing a paper
- Figuring out how to study

2. Strengths-Based Counseling - Take the Strengths Quest assessment and discuss the results with trained staff. Developed by Gallup, the Strengths Quest assessment tool has been taken by over 700,000 college students.

Take the StrengthsQuest assessment and discuss the results with trained staff. Developed by Gallup, the StrengthsQuest assessment tool has been taken by over 700,000 college students.

With StrengthsQuest, students can:

- Use their greatest natural talents to improve their grades
- Strategically determine a rewarding career path based on their unique strength

3. Technology to Enhance Learning - TAP offers training and consultation in the use of technology to harness the learning style of any student!

How can technology enhance learning?

- There are many computer programs designed to focus on visual, auditory, or kinesthetic styles of learning.
- Are you a visual, auditory, or tactile learner?
- TAP offers training and consultation in the use of technology to harness the learning style of any student!
- Technology can promote success in a student's academic program and career development. Make sure to speak with TAP staff to receive assistance in using technology today.

4. Connection Points Seminars - Connection Points give students the opportunity to meet and interact with other students while expanding their own personal knowledge in creative fun seminars.

Join TAP for interactive Connection Points seminars throughout the semester! Students have the opportunity to:

- Get involved

- Develop effective learning strategies
- Engage in interactive activities
- Enhance team building skills
- Gain self-knowledge

How to get started:

1. Complete the DRES Intake Process: TAP is part of the Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES) office. Students (if they have not done so already) must bring disability documentation, with information about the functional limitations resulting from the disability, to the office and meet with a counselor to complete the intake process
2. Meet with the Transition Specialist: Students new to Northridge can meet with the Transition Specialist to discuss participation in TAP. The Transition Specialist will discuss the TAP program and help students connect to the programming right for them. We provide a variety of support services to empower students, foster independence, promote achievement of realistic career and educational goals, and assist students in discovering, developing and demonstrating their full potential.

Appendix C: Survey

**The Journey through Graduate School:
An Exploratory Study of CSUN Early Childhood Education Graduate Students
With Learning Challenges**

Demographic Information

Gender: M or F

Age: 22-25 26-29 30-33
 34-37 38-41 42- 45
 46-49 50-54 55-59
 60+

Ethnicity: White, non-Hispanic Latino/Hispanic African-American
 Asian Pacific Islander Multi-ethnic
 Other, please specify _____

Primary language growing up: English only, English/Spanish, Spanish only,
 Other, please specify: _____

Education Information

How long have you been in the ECE MA program?

1st semester 2nd semester 3rd semester
 4th semester 5th semester 6th semester 7th or more

If applicable, are you currently working on: Comprehensive Exam Thesis

Expected graduation date: _____

Undergraduate Grade Point Average: 4.0 - 3.8 3.7 - 3.5 3.4 - 3.2
 3.1-2.9 less than 2.9

Graduate Grade Point Average, if applicable: 4.0 - 3.8 3.7 - 3.5 3.4 - 3.2
 3.1-2.9 less than 2.9

Do you receive financial aid? Yes No

Health Information

How would you characterize your health during the Master's program (e.g., pregnancy, insufficient nutrition, insufficient sleep, traumatic life events, medical emergencies)?

Family Information

What are your family responsibilities during the program? (e.g., dependent children or parents)?

Employment Information

What was your working status during the program? Did you work full time or part time? Did you work in an Early Childhood Education setting?

Please answer all questions that are applicable to you

1. Have you ever been formally diagnosed with a learning disability? Yes No

If yes, please answer the following questions:

(a) When were you diagnosed?

(b) What is your specific learning disability?

(c) In what ways does it impact you?

(d) Reflecting back on your past educational experiences, in what ways have you been impacted by your learning disability?

(e) Are you registered with CSUN Disability Resources and Educational Services?
Yes No

2. If you have not been formally diagnosed with a learning disability, do you suspect you have some special learning challenges? Yes No

(a) If so, what do you think they might be?

3. How would you describe your undergraduate educational experience?

4. Please explain why you chose to attend CSUN's ECE Master's program.

(a) What has your academic experience been like thus far?

(b) If you have a learning disability or learning challenge(s), have you shared this information with your professors? Why or why not? [If applicable continue answering c, d and e, if not, please proceed to Question 5]

- (c) How helpful, supportive, and encouraging have your professors been with regard to your learning needs?
 - (d) In what ways has your outlook on your learning disability changed since entering graduate school?
 - (e) What could the school/program/professors do to better support your journey through graduate school?
5. How would you describe your English proficiency? What are your language strengths and areas for growth potential? What are you doing to address your developmental needs in Standard English (academic English – that include vocabulary, grammar, spelling, syntax, and pragmatics)?
6. Who is helping you succeed? How did you figure out who would be the best person(s) for the support you needed?
- (a) What are your coping methods/support systems (e.g., friends, family members, organizations, faith/religion)?
7. What strategies have you developed or uncovered that were helpful for you in the following areas?:
- (a) Reading the books/academic source material with comprehension
 - (b) Learning new and difficult vocabulary, such as in theories or research principles
 - (c) Preparing for tests
 - (d) Working on papers, including editing and APA referencing
 - (e) Group projects
8. What advice would you give to other students with learning disabilities/challenges to help them succeed in graduate school and in particular this program?
9. Did you learn anything

Appendix D: CSUN Consent Form

California State University, Northridge CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN RESEARCH SUBJECT

THE JOURNEY THROUGH GRADUATE SCHOOL: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF CSUN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION GRADUATE STUDENTS WITH LEARNING CHALLENGES

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything that you do not understand before deciding if you want to participate. A researcher listed below will be available to answer your questions.

RESEARCH TEAM

Researcher:

Stephanie Ona
Educational Psychology & Counseling
(310) 962-7464

Faculty Advisor:

Carrie Rothstein-Fisch Ph.D. & Co-coordinator of the MA in Early Childhood Education
Educational Psychology & Counseling
18111 Nordhoff St.
Northridge, CA 91330-8265

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study is to learn how graduate students with either diagnosed learning disabilities or suspected learning challenges (defined as difficulties with reading or writing or other academic tasks that have been problematic but not formally assessed) have been successful in completing their MA degree in Early Childhood Education.

SUBJECTS

Inclusion Requirements

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are currently enrolled in the Early Childhood Education program at CSUN with having a known learning disability or if you think you have special learning challenges that seem like disabilities but have not been formally assessed.

Time Commitment

There is no time frame for completing the survey questions. You can complete the survey on your own time at your own pace. However, the researcher does ask that you complete the survey as quickly as possible, as it will be completed during class.

PROCEDURES

You will be asked to participate to complete a survey answering a series of questions based on your academic experiences of having a learning disability or learning challenge.

The survey questions include demographic, education, health, and employment information and conclude with recommendations or suggestions of how professors can better support/accommodate students with learning disabilities/challenges. There is no time frame for the survey; however, the researcher will ask you to respond in a timely manner. The survey should take no longer than 15 minutes to complete.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

The possible risks and/or discomforts may include emotional distress during the interview process.

BENEFITS

Subject Benefits

You will not directly benefit from participation in this study.

Benefits to Others or Society

Your contribution to this study will help bring awareness to the large population of students with learning disabilities enrolled in graduate school. Your stories will educate professors on your interest in the education field, how to better accommodate students with learning challenges, and inspire other students with learning challenges achieve a graduate degree.

ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATION

The only alternative to participation in this study is not to participate.

COMPENSATION, COSTS AND REIMBURSEMENT

Compensation for Participation

You will not be paid for your participation in this research study.

Reimbursement

You will not be reimbursed for any out of pocket expenses, such as parking or transportation fees.

WITHDRAWAL OR TERMINATION FROM THE STUDY AND CONSEQUENCES

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time. **If you decide to withdraw from this study you should notify the research team immediately.** The research team may also end your participation in this study if you do not follow instructions, miss scheduled visits, or if your safety and welfare are at risk.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Subject Identifiable Data

All identifiable information that will be collected about you will either be removed or replaced with a pseudonym.

Data Storage

The surveys will be stored at the researcher's home in a lock box. The surveys will be destroyed immediately after the researcher's thesis is published.

Data Access

The researcher and faculty advisor named on the first page of this form will have access to your questionnaire. Any information derived from this research project that personally identifies you will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without your separate consent, except as specifically required by law. Publications and/or presentations that result from this study will not include identifiable information about you.

Data Retention

The researcher will keep the surveys at the researcher’s home in a lock box. The surveys will be destroyed immediately after the researcher’s thesis is published.

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS

If you have any comments, concerns, or questions regarding the conduct of this research please contact the research team listed on the first page of this form.

If you are unable to reach a member of the research team listed on the first page of the form and have general questions, or you have concerns or complaints about the research study, research team, or questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact Research and Sponsored Projects, 18111 Nordhoff Street, California State University, Northridge, Northridge, CA 91330-8232, or phone 818-677-2901.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION STATEMENT

You should not sign this form unless you have read it and been given a copy of it to keep. **Participation in this study is voluntary.** You may refuse to answer any question or discontinue your involvement at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with California State University, Northridge. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this consent form and have had a chance to ask any questions that you have about the study.

I agree to participate in the study.

_____	_____
Subject Signature	Date

Printed Name of Subject	
_____	_____
Researcher Signature	Date

Printed Name of Researcher	

Appendix E: Project Information Form

Date: September 28, 2012

Project Title: The Journey Through Graduate School: An Exploratory Study of CSUN Early Childhood Education Graduate Students With Learning Challenges

Researcher Name: Stephanie Ona

All sections of the form must be completed within the field provided (do not attach a separate form with your responses). Type as much as you need, each field will expand to accommodate your answers. You must use 12 pt font. Do not leave any sections blank. Answer all questions asked in each section. Incomplete and/or handwritten forms will be returned.

Section 1 Background and Purpose of the Study

- Provide a concise description of the research project.
- State the objectives, and rationale.
- Provide background information on the hypothesis and/or research question to be tested including references/citations, if applicable.

“Students with learning disabilities are enrolling in postsecondary education in escalating numbers” (Orr & Goodman, 2010, p.213). Because of the continuous increase in students with learning disabilities entering in postsecondary education, there is an overwhelming need to explore the academic journey students have endured to achieve a master’s degree. Research suggests that students with learning disabilities who are supported academically and emotionally by their teachers, friends, and family have a greater chance of enrolling in postsecondary education (Leyser & Greenberger, 2008).

The purpose of this study is to learn how graduate students with either diagnosed learning disabilities or suspect learning challenges (defined as difficulties with reading or writing or other academic tasks that have been problematic but not formally assessed) have been successful in entering the Early Childhood Education MA program at CSUN. From the survey, the researcher hopes to learn what factors helped the students succeed. Some possible themes that might emerge from the survey include time of diagnosis, knowledge of disability, support, resiliency, adaptations, motivation/determination, and the attraction to the Early Childhood Education field.

Section 2 Subject Information and Recruitment Procedures.

Subjects

- Identify the study population (age, gender, health, etc.).
- If vulnerable (such as minors, prisoners or cognitively or emotionally impaired) please describe extra protections of rights and welfare.

Recruitment

- How will subjects be recruited? Include sample advertisement/flyer.
- Will a screening device be used to select from the wider subject pool?

- Will there be any deception (that is, not telling subjects exactly what is being tested)? If so, provide a justification and plans for debriefing.
- How will subjects consent to the study (include minors (assent) and adults)?
- If advertisements or a letter of invitation will be used to recruit, attach copies.

The survey was distributed to all current students enrolled in the ECE MA program. Three professors, each with a class representing primarily first, second, and third year students, distributed the survey to their students. As a result, twenty-four students enrolled in EPC 634 – Language and Cognition, including mostly first years with a few second year students and one 5th semester person responding in this group. In addition, nine of students enrolled in EPC 683 – Families completed the survey; this included was comprised of second year students. Finally, seven of surveys were collected from third year students in EPC 696 – Directed Graduate Research. Although the survey was distributed to three classes with approximately 50 students total, it was expected that only a portion of all students would disclose that they have a learning disability/challenges. Only the students who were formally diagnosed or suspected learning challenges surveys will be analyzed.

Section 3 Research Methodology and Study Procedures.

Procedure

- Describe in a step-by-step fashion, what students will experience in the research. For example, what will happen first, next, and so on. This should include the researcher’s introductory remarks, all testing, questions, observations, follow-up and debriefing of the study.
- Include the time duration of each part of the research.
- Will subjects be compensated for their participation? If so, describe. This may include cash or gift certificates or course credit. However, subjects cannot receive both course credit AND compensation.
- Specify the duration of each procedure.
- Identify any new procedures that you are investigating in the study and explain how they differ from standard procedures (medical, psychological, or educational).
- If deception is used, provide justification and plans for debriefing.

Instruments

- Attach the exact data collection instruments to be used in the study. If open-ended questions are asked, give examples of prompts to encourage responses.
- If translations are required, include those as well.
- If permission to use a copyrighted instrument is required, please include that as well.

Dr. Carrie Rothstein-Fisch, Dr. Joannie Busillo-Aguayo, and Sloane Lefkowitz-Burt will distribute the survey to all current ECE students during class. The professors will describe the nature of the study to the students. The professors will inform the participants that their participation is voluntary and they can disclose as much or as little

as they are comfortable with. The survey should take the participant's no longer than 15 minutes to complete. The participants will not be compensated for their participation.

Section 4 Anticipated Risks and Minimization of Risks

- List any potential risks to subjects and what steps have been or will be taken to minimize these risks.

The researcher will minimize the potential risk factors by focusing on the positive aspects and attributes of the subjects' academic journey. However, some potential risks from the survey may cause the subjects social/emotional distress. The questions may bring up past feelings and experiences. The subjects have the option to skip or refuse to answer any questions and withdraw from the study at any time without question or penalty. If the participants have any emotional distress, they are encouraged to seek counseling services however this is unlikely because their accomplishments should highlight their own resiliency and fortitude. If the participants are current students of CSUN, they can receive services at no cost for the subject or to the researcher.

Section 5 Potential Benefits

- Specify the benefits that this project will have to society and specify how the project will directly benefit the subject.
- If the project will not benefit subjects directly then please state so.
- Explain why the risks are reasonable in relation to the potential benefits to subjects and to society.
- Do not include compensation in this section, as it is not a benefit.

Because of the growing number of students with learning disabilities enrolling in postsecondary education, some benefits of the survey may include the student's recognition of their resiliency and the factors that have been crucial for their success. These are likely valuable for many other students both in the Early Childhood Program and for others in Education. The researcher is interested in the reason or story behind why students with learning disabilities are interested in the education field and how they can better meet the needs of students with learning disabilities. From reading the subjects stories of how they ended up at CSUN's graduate program, will hopefully inspire professors with stories of fortitude and influence other students with learning disabilities that they can achieve a graduate degree.

Section 6 Confidentiality of Research Information/Data

- Explain how confidentiality of subject information will be maintained.
- Specify where study records will be stored, how they will be secured, and who will have access.
- Specify whether data will be collected anonymously (i.e. no direct identifying information such as name, address, or birth date, and no codes linking back to identifiers will be created/accessed.)

- If you intend to collect identifiable information specify, when identifiable information will be destroyed, who will have access to identifiable information, where it will be stored and how it will be made secure.
- Specify the planned final disposition of all data after the study is complete (e.g. the data will be maintained for 3 years after the conclusion of the study and then destroyed, the data will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study, etc.)

The participants will complete the survey during each of the professor's classes. The researcher will not be present to assure complete anonymity. Once the students complete the survey, Dr. Carrie Rothstein-Fisch will hand the researcher an enclosed envelope of all of the completed surveys. The researcher will only analyze the surveys of the students who disclose their learning disability or challenges. The data will be stored in a locked box at the researcher's home, which only the researcher will have access to. The data will be immediately destroyed once the researcher's thesis has been approved.

Section 7 Potential Outcomes of Study

- Describe the projected outcomes of the project and how they relate to your hypothesis.
- Include the significance of your project to your discipline, department, school, university, community, etc.

The projected outcome is designed to describe a possibly growing number of professionals in Early Childhood Education with disabilities. Data from the survey will also provide professors personal insight on common struggles students have so that professors can better accommodate and support students with learning disabilities as well as why students with learning disabilities are drawn to the education field. Some possible themes that might emerge from the survey include time of diagnosis, knowledge of disability, support, resiliency, adaptations, motivation/determination, and the attraction to the Early Childhood Education field. Benefits to participating include a sense of pride and accomplishment of achieving a degree.

Section 8 Researcher Qualifications and Expertise

- Summarize your qualifications to conduct this project (include prior research and training--résumés may be attached)

The researcher's interest to learn about students with learning challenges of their academic journey to obtain a master's degree stemmed from the researcher being identified with a learning disability as a young child. Despite negative outcomes of children with learning disabilities, the researcher's perseverance led her to enroll in graduate school. While in graduate school, the researcher was a teaching assistant for one of the Early Childhood Education courses and worked closely with the students on ways to improve their writing. The rewarding experience of working with adults who struggled in writing, showed the researcher how much she has grown academically and how much empathy she has working with students with learning challenges. The researcher's goal is to become an advocate for students with learning challenges by presenting this study and

her story to professionals and to potential students interested in graduate education. The researcher will be under the supervision of Carrie Rothstein-Fisch, Ph.D.