

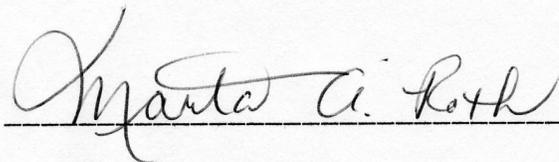
Perceptions of Potential Teachers Toward
Individuals with Visible and Non-visible Disabilities

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Marta A. Roth", is written over a horizontal dashed line.

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Abstract

The research presented in this project explores differences in how people perceive an individual with either a visible or non-visible disability in various social situations. There were five different social situations presented where participants were asked to rate whether they agreed or disagreed with a character's choices in each of the situations. Participants were also asked to comment briefly on what they would do in the same situation. The results were analyzed and showed that the participants generally did not show a bias toward an individual with a disability. The gender of the participants was evaluated as a factor, as was any previous experiences a participant had with individuals with disabilities. While females did outnumber males in regards to compassion toward an individual with a disability, it was a very small margin. With regard to prior experiences, there was no significant connection between participants who had prior experiences and those who did not. The results of this study suggest that there is no significant connection between attitudes of participants and an individual with a visible or non-visible disability. However, data showed that individuals who use a wheelchair may be more likely to receive negative feedback than people with other kinds of visible disabilities.

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Chapter 1

Statement of Problem

A young boy is walking down the street with his father and they pass a woman using a wheelchair. The young boy stares at the woman as she passes, with his eyes focused on her and his mouth slightly open. Then he turns to his father and asks, “What’s wrong with her, Dad?”

A woman enters a bank and wants to open a checking account. She looks around for someone to help her and all of the associates are busy. She takes a seat in the waiting area and begins looking at a magazine. One of the associates becomes available and calls, “Next please!” The woman continues to sit at her seat and does not respond. The associate tries again to announce that she is available, and again the woman in the waiting area continues to sit. The associate rolls her eyes and leaves her cubicle to go get the woman’s attention.

Individuals with physical disabilities generally cannot hide the fact that they look different from many of the people around them. Often, members of the public might stare a little longer at someone who uses a wheelchair, is missing a limb or exhibits a facial deformity. But with this obviousness also comes knowledge that the individual *does* have a disability, which can give others a feeling of understanding, empathy, curiosity or even pity.

Individuals with disabilities that are not visibly apparent may not have stigmas and judgments placed upon them, but their peers may not be as understanding or supportive as they are for individuals whose disabilities are obvious. In the previous scenario where a

woman enters a bank to open a checking account, the bank associate is annoyed that the woman isn't paying attention. However, knowledge that this woman is deaf and therefore didn't hear the announcement could have changed the bank associate's reaction. It is possible that it could have changed her feelings toward her (e.g. pity instead of annoyance).

In ancient Roman societies, it was both common and accepted for parents of a newborn with a disability to drown their child (Bersani & Manion, 1987). But as a newborn that was not yet able to communicate or move about on a large scale, the disability would most likely had to have been physical for the parents to notice it. This could have meant that newborns that had a non-visible disability would have been permitted to live, and only later would differences in behavior or other areas have been noticed. At this point, after bonds had been more deeply established, killing the child may not have been done as easily.

For primitive nomadic tribes, physical disabilities inhibited a tribe's ability to move about quickly and also created a situation where someone had to be provided for without contributing to the well-being of the tribe (Bersani & Manion, 1987). However, mental deficiencies were also considered a liability by these tribes (Bersani & Manion, 1987). It is possible that while a physical disability might slow a tribe's pace, someone with a less-visible disability might still require a lot of extra attention, direction and care, which might not have been available during times of quick movement and stress.

Today, people with disabilities can still be victims of negative attention or judgment put upon them by societal ideologies. There are many variables that can contribute to how people with disabilities are viewed by a typical person, including the typical person's age, sex and prior experience/exposure to people with disabilities. Men tend to have more negative attitudes toward people with disabilities than women (Ahlborn,

Jungers & Panek, 2006). Research shows that the age of the individual evaluating a person with a disability plays a factor in the attitude toward the person with the disability. Very young children (younger than 3) and adults tend to have a more positive attitude toward people with a disability as compared to young children and adolescents (Ahlborn, Jungers & Panek, 61-62). “Finally, there is some evidence to suggest that children's attitudes toward people with disabilities are related to the frequency with which they interact with classmates with disabilities” (Diamond & Innes, 1999, p.105). This implies that the more exposure one has to individuals with disabilities, the more comfortable they will feel around them.

Historically, both visible and non-visible disabilities attracted negative attention from society. In 2004, 284 people from the Midwest were assessed and it was determined that the term “mentally challenged” was more accepted than “physically disabled” (Panek & Smith, 2004).

This project is intended to add to the body of research that exists between perceptions of individuals with visible and non-visible disabilities. This project is also intended to expand the research by incorporating the attitudes of college students regarding individuals with either visibly apparent or non-visible disabilities. Do people tend to be more accepting of individuals with visible disabilities or individuals with non-visible disabilities? What factor will prior experience with individuals with disabilities play? This paper hypothesizes that people will feel more accepting of individuals who have visible disabilities than

those who have non-visible disabilities. It is also hypothesized that those who have had personal experiences that include individuals with disabilities will be more accepting of people with both visible and non-visible disabilities.

Review of Current Literature

The way in which a typical person perceives an individual with a disability can be affected by multiple factors, including the person's exposure to or knowledge of disabilities, the characteristics of the disability itself as manifested in the individual who actually has the disability, the kind of relationship the typical person has with the individual with the disability, et cetera. The ways in which people develop their ideas, opinions and feelings toward individuals with various disabilities will give insight as to why some people put in a situation might act or feel differently than others placed in the same situation. The following literature review seeks to take into account some of the ways in which society, peers, teachers and parents may develop and share their perceptions of individuals with disabilities. The way in which the nature of the disability affects these images will also be discussed.

Society

Trying to understand why some people feel uncomfortable around individuals with disabilities may start with society as a whole, and the ways in which humans have evolved through time. Throughout human evolutionary history tribe members who exhibited visible, physical signs of a malady were interpreted as "diseased" and were avoided and kept at great distances (Park, Faulkner & Schaller, 2003). There weren't as

many verbal terms to describe the symptoms and conditions, so it was left to visual cues to signal a possible threat to tribal health and safety. Odd behavioral cues were also seen as a potential danger, such as facial ticks and other behavioral anomalies, and these people were also avoided. Conditions accompanied by visible symptoms were most likely to alienate an the individual, while a condition that was not outwardly visible had a much less negative impact in labeling the individual as one to avoid (Park, Faulkner & Schaller, 2003).

Interestingly, this behavior of alienation due to fear of contamination was also recorded by Jane Goodall (1986) during her observation of Gombe chimpanzees in Africa. Two chimps, who she believed to have polio, were unable to use some of their limbs and were visibly limping or pulling themselves in order to move around. The other chimpanzees in the group showed fear of the limping chimps and left them out of grooming rituals and other social situations.

Because this disease-avoidance behavior seems to be part of life's evolutionary history, it may shed light on why some people today tend to feel uncomfortable around individuals with disabilities even if they don't know what disability that individual has. Park, Faulkner & Schaller (2003) pointed out that (during tribal times) it was better to make the mistake of avoiding someone who was in fact not contagious, rather than interacting with a contagious person and then potentially enabling the sickness to spread. Breaking this stereotype may prove to be

difficult, but educating the public on multiple disabilities may help to allay their fears.

Peers

Thousands of years ago, villages and tribes were concerned about diseases contaminating or possibly wiping out their population. Today, some of the remnants of this avoidance instinct may still exist, but on a much smaller scale. Fortunately, that likely means that helping the general population develop more positive images of people with disabilities is easier than it might have been a long time ago.

Despite recent laws making it mandatory for all students to be as fully included as possible in the general education curriculum (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004), many students with disabilities today are still fairly separated from their peers in the school system (Worrell, 2008). This can lead to typically developing peers not having regular interactions or the opportunity to establish relationships with peers with disabilities, especially those whose disability is moderate to severe. This opportunity is important to facilitate during grade school, when students are most likely to have a negative attitude toward their peers with disabilities (Ahlborn, Panek & Jungers, 2006). As children age, their attitudes become more negative for several years and then begin to change toward becoming more positive again once they reach adulthood (Harper & Peterson, 2001).

However, it is also important to consider that a typical person's positive *view* of a person with a disability does not necessarily mean that the typical person feels *comfortable* around someone with a disability.

In addition to the age of a typical peer playing a role in how students with disabilities are perceived, the sex of the typical peer also comes into play. Men tend to hold more negative attitudes toward of persons with disabilities when compared to women (Ahlborn, Panek & Jungers, 2006). "The teacher's sex obviously influences attitudes toward children with development difficulties" (Kis-Glavas, et. al, 1996, p. 14). This seems to be true of teachers as well as the general public: The most positive attitudes are expressed by female teachers while the most negative attitudes are expressed by male teachers (Kis-Glavas, et. al, 1996). Also, women tend to have more empathy toward others in general, regardless of whether or not the other person has a disability (Hergenrather & Rhodes, 2007). One explanation given by Hergenrather & Rhodes might be that, "As men deviate from roles they identify as masculine, they become more concerned with the perceptions of others and less comfortable interacting with persons with disabilities" (p. 72).

Previously it was discussed that evolutionary disease-avoidance behavior might be partially responsible for a typically developed peer's rejection of someone who has a visible disability. However, a study conducted by Yuker (1988) ranked 24 disabilities according to acceptability and severity. Mental retardation fell into the category as

the third least-accepted disability. The disabilities ranked in the number one and two slots were multiple disabilities and mental illness, of which mental retardation can also play a role (Yuker, 1988). Being that mental retardation can often be a disability that has few visible attributes, it is worth noting that it is ranked so highly as a negative disability as compared to other disabilities that would be more visible.

Students in middle and high school may form a more positive perception toward individuals with disabilities if they can gain a greater frequency of exposure. As children and adolescents transition into adults, they do become more accepting than they were as adolescents (Hergenrather & Rhodes, 2007). Even during adulthood however, prejudices can come into play. Adults are less likely to hire someone with a visible disability for a position if customer service is a significant part of the job description (Louvet, 2007). Still, the more experience one has with individuals with disabilities, the higher the chances of that individual having a positive attitude toward people with disabilities (Smith, 2003).

Teachers

As students transition into adulthood, teachers can have a huge impact on a student's life and attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. This impact would ideally begin during kindergarten and last through post-secondary education. If teachers act as an example and

model positive behaviors, students may be more likely to show similar attitudes when faced with similar situations (Wilford, 2007). Even at the college level, women tend to have more empathy and positive attitudes toward people with disabilities than men (Hergenrather & Rhodes, 2007). Although it's still common for women (although more empathetic) to feel uncomfortable and unsure around individuals with disabilities (Smith, 2003), teachers who reported higher levels of educational training or experience were found to hold more positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities (Reusen, Shoho, & Barker, 2001).

In order to understand the ways in which some college students develop and adapt their beliefs and opinions of people with disabilities, a service-learning project was conducted by Valerie Smith at Syracuse University in which students were paired with a partner who had a moderate to severe disability. The typical students had little to no previous experiences interacting with individuals with disabilities. During the course of a college semester, the typical students kept journals of their thoughts and experiences. Most participants felt nervous and anxious about meeting their partners for the first time: "I was worried that I'd say something that might offend her...was condescending..." (p. 83). But over time participants began to see the person rather than the disability, and most felt that they had formed a bond of friendship with the person and didn't see the disability as a

negative attribute, just something that made each person who they were. “Labels...suggest how we should think about (people with disabilities) as well as provide a justification for action toward them...” (p. 83). This experience shows that teachers can greatly impact the interactions that typical students have with students with disabilities. Though this example is at the college level, teachers in grade school can influence the attitudes of their students by facilitating an environment where students with and without disabilities can interact with and learn from each other. In addition, all teachers of all grade levels set an example and a standard for how all students should be treated. It is important to know the views of future teachers, as they will be the future of education.

Parents

While teachers have the ability to influence the experiences of their students, parents generally provide the earliest link a typical child will have to someone with a disability. Whether it’s an elderly grandparent who uses a wheelchair or someone in the neighborhood who has a service dog, the way a parent reacts to these individuals will simultaneously impact how their child views these people as well. One study conducted by Diamond & Innes (1999) examined the link between a mother’s comments and a child’s perceptions. The mother and child were placed together in a room and shown a slideshow of photos of

children who had various disabilities. The mother and child discussed various aspects of each photo and the child shown, and the link between the mother's comments and the child's perceptions were examined. The findings suggested that, "...when mothers talk with their children about disabilities, the content of their conversation is influenced by the disability that they are discussing" (p. 107). In addition, the mothers made more comments and asked more questions regarding the photos showing a physical disability rather than a non-physical disability. This study demonstrates how the attitudes expressed by parents can influence the ideas their children will develop toward other children with disabilities.

It's also important to note that very young children have not yet developed an understanding of disabilities and tend to be unbiased in their attitudes (Ahlborn, Panek & Jungers, 2006). Therefore, parental influence can have a large impact on whether children will remain unbiased or will develop a prejudice as they get older, so positive comments and attitudes should be encouraged.

Knowing that parents can greatly influence their child's perceptions might allow society to help curb the evolutionary tendencies of avoidance behaviors toward people with disabilities. As adults grow and learn, they can explain to their children that just because one person is in a wheelchair does not mean their child would automatically also be in a wheelchair simply by associating with that person. The

more society, peers, teachers and parents work together and increase the time involving people with disabilities, the more the attitudes and comfort levels toward people with disabilities are addressed and of children today can be positively affected. In addition, it is important to consider how people without disabilities come to their conclusions about their feelings and opinions toward individuals who have disabilities. If we are to understand how attitudes are formed regarding a person's attitude toward someone with a visible versus non-visible disability, then it is beneficial to consider how that person's history (previous experiences) and gender might factor into his or her perceptions.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter explains the methods used to collect and analyze data collected from potential teachers, specifically college students enrolled in an Introduction to Teacher Education class. This research attempts to examine the differences in the way college students perceive individuals with a physical disability versus individuals with a non-visible disability, and to what degree a student's prior experiences and gender affect this perception. The setting, selection of subjects, development of the survey scenarios, and information about the type of data collected is explained.

When creating this study of student perceptions, the focus was put on students at a university in Ohio who were enrolled in a 100-level Introduction to Teacher Education course. Because these students were enrolled in an introduction to teaching course, they assumedly had some intentions or curiosities about becoming a teacher. As stated previously, the way in which teachers portray people with disabilities to their

students can impact the students' perspectives of these individuals. College students today are the future of education, and having an understanding of their views toward people with disabilities can help carve an image of what the future might look like regarding people with disabilities in the classroom.

The survey created (Appendix A) was meant to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. It was important to collect quantitative data (in the form of a Likert Scale, as described below) so results could be measured and compared. Qualitative data was also essential to this project because understanding the perceptions of individuals was essential to answering the question of whether people are more accepting of individuals with visible or non-visible disabilities.

It was determined that presenting a participant with a situation and then having them rate the scenario and react with their own opinions would allow a diversity of information to be collected. The scenarios were designed to showcase situations that were fairly common and perhaps even familiar, so that participants could imagine the situation easily. Setting up a situation that was unfamiliar or rare might have caused participants too much confusion, and the aim of this research project may have been compromised.

In order to achieve the most honest results, each of the 5 scenarios was presented with a character of whom the participants were questioned, rather than asking them to put forth their own anticipated

actions. This was designed to help participants feel safer in answering honestly about how a character reacted, rather than knowing that their own actions would be critiqued.

As mentioned above, data collection took the form of a survey, which was distributed to the student participants. All surveys were accompanied by a cover letter explaining the purpose of the data being collected as well as the fact that completing the survey was completely voluntary and all participants would remain anonymous. Students who chose not to participate were asked to return their blank survey at the end, when all surveys were collected. By having the participants of this study fill out surveys, data was able to be collected accurately, quickly and uniformly. The survey was distributed to the students at the beginning of class, at which point they were given approximately ten minutes of class time to complete the survey. The survey was collected at the end of class.

The survey (see Appendix) was made up of five questions that required participants to provide answers that were both quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative data consisted of 5 scenarios which were developed as mentioned above. Participants were asked to rate their responses using a Likert scale, in which students had to check a box next to the rating that best reflected their answer: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree to indicate how they agreed or disagreed with how the character acted in each scenario.

Immediately following each question, participants were asked to comment briefly on what they would do in the situation if they were the character.

This allowed the opportunity to gain further insight into a participant's opinions and/or thoughts. The questions were situational and were intended to get a response that would most accurately anticipate a participant's actions and/or reactions if they had taken the place of the title character in each situation. Although there were no "wrong" answers in this survey, the scenarios were set up to allow the participants to imagine the situation and then, after the most basic element of the scene had been set up, they were told that someone with a disability was involved. Whether the participant agreed or disagreed with the character's actions did not necessarily carry a 'positive' or 'negative' weight, as the purpose of this project was not to judge the participant's ethics, but simply to judge how they reacted once they noticed the person in the scenario had a disability. For example, in survey question one, the character of Tom turned around toward the person being disruptive. Participants could imply that Tom had the intention of asking the disruptive person to quiet down. However, once Tom noticed the person was in a wheelchair, he decided not to say anything. A participant who marked "strongly agree" or "agree" to this situation was presumably agreeing that because the disruptive person had a visible disability, Tom was right to not say anything. A participant

who marked “strongly disagree” or “disagree” to this situation was presumably thinking that Tom should have said something despite the visible disability. The comments participants made following each scenario helped to clarify their beliefs. Results are discussed based on a combination of their written responses (which were evaluated qualitatively) and their Likert responses (which were evaluated quantitatively).

The survey was broken into two sections: The first part gathered the participants’ opinions on the 5 scenarios and the second part collected demographic information. The first section of questions was intended to gauge how an individual would react in various situations involving people with disabilities. The second section was intended to distinguish between male and female participants as well as the participants’ previous experiences (if any) with people with disabilities.

The analysis of the data was descriptive in the form of percentages, pie graphs and charts.

Chapter 4

Results

The following will examine each of the 5 survey questions by looking for trends in the quantitative data collected for each section. Qualitative data will also be mentioned in this section, but will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters. The purpose is to answer the research questions of 1) Do potential teachers hold more positive attitudes about people without visible disabilities; 2) Do females hold more positive attitudes than males; and 3) Does more extensive previous experience with people with disabilities lead to a equal treatment in social situations?

The perceptions of potential future teachers enrolled in an Introduction to Teacher Education course were assessed using the survey instrument described in Chapter 3. The sample of potential teachers was selected by requesting to go into classrooms and asking for student volunteers to participate in the study. This course was taught in five different sections and the teachers of each section were contacted by email. Two teachers agreed to allow their students to participate in the survey and, after repeated attempts, the other three teachers did not respond to emails. Of the 52 students who were given a survey, 46 returned a completed survey, which yielded an 88% return rate. Of those 46, 27 of them were female (58.6%) and 19 were male (41.4%). While the number of participants who responded to the

present survey are high enough to allow for some statistical interpretation, at the same time, the results of the survey must be viewed with a degree of caution in that these results only reflect the opinions and attitudes of a small sampling of students enrolled as undergraduates in an Education program.

The first research question asked whether or not respondents (potential teachers) would be more accepting of individuals with visible versus non-visible disabilities. For example, would the presence of a visible disability cause a participant to ignore socially inappropriate behaviors by assuming that the behavior was unintentional and just a result of a visually apparent disability? Would the presence of a disability make a participant uncomfortable and therefore the participant would choose not to interact with the individual simply because of the presence of a visible disability?

The first, third and fifth scenarios in the survey portray a character (Tom, John and Sara, respectively) who choose to not interact with the person who has a disability (See Appendix B, Figure 3.1). Of the participants, 21% either agreed or strongly agreed that they would ignore the situation/person. However, 47% of participants indicated that they would interact with the person. The second and fourth scenarios in the survey portray a character (Gina and Matt, respectively) who chooses to interact with the person who has a disability. Of the participants, 58.7% either agreed or strongly agreed that they would

interact with the person in the scene. In fact, only 13% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the choices of the characters in the scenarios.

Survey question one (see Appendix B, Figure 1.1) produced interesting results: 28% of participants remained neutral on Tom's decision to ignore the noises of the person behind him, while 42% agreed with Tom's decision. In fact, 23% of participants commented that the "nature of the disability" would determine whether they personally would interact with the person making noises, stating that if the noises were not voluntary then they would continue to ignore them. Of the remaining participants, 36% reported that they would ask the person to be quieter, while 41% reported they would ignore the sounds and/or move to a different seat. The quantitative data for this scenario suggests that potential teachers may feel uncomfortable interacting with individuals who use a wheelchair in certain social situations. The implications of this will be discussed in chapters 5 and 6.

Survey question two (see Appendix B, Figure 1.2) produced the following results: 54% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed with Gina's decision to react to the individual who cut in front of her in line. Of the remaining participants, 26% remained neutral while 20% disagreed with her actions. Written comments made by participants suggest that those who agreed with Gina's actions felt that "the rules should apply to everyone" and that exceptions should not be made because of the presence of a disability. One comment from a

participant who disagreed with Gina's actions stated that, "He probably doesn't get many breaks in life – I would just let him go." Another participant, who marked 'neutral' as her choice, said that she would have let the person remain in front of her regardless of presence of a disability simply to avoid the conflict.

Survey question three (see Appendix B, Figure 1.3) had a large percentage of participants in agreement with 79% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with John's actions. Of the remaining participants, 17% were neutral and 4% agreed. Qualitative data had a common message, basically stating that John should either have helped the woman who asked for help or found someone else who could have helped her. Of the few who agreed with his actions, one participant commented, "I know it is wrong, but I probably would have done the same thing."

Survey question four (see Appendix B, Figure 1.4) resulted in 65% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing with Matt's decision to acknowledge the other student. Participants who remained neutral in their opinion rated at 29%, while 6% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with Matt's actions. Qualitative data largely reflected that participants approved of Matt's "friendly, casual" comment.

Survey question five (see Appendix B, Figure 1.5) yielded the largest percentage of neutral votes, totaling 53%. Participants who agreed or strongly agreed totaled 17%, while 30% either disagreed or

strongly disagreed. Several participants commented that, depending on the situation, they would have either offered help or left the woman alone. Another popular comment was that they would have gladly helped her, but did not feel comfortable initiating an offer.

The results in this section presented detailed quantitative information about the study. The following section will continue to discuss quantitative data and look closer at the comments and qualitative data collected from participants. Both the quantitative and qualitative data will be analyzed, and perceptions and attitudes presented from participants will be examined.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on qualitative and quantitative data collected from the survey, it can be reasonably concluded that the participants of this study

were considerably comfortable interacting with an individual with a disability, regardless of whether it was visible or non-visible. Further, the hypothesis that participants who had previous experiences with individuals with disabilities would be more accepting of those individuals did not appear as significant factor. In addition, there was not a significant difference between the responses of males and females in this study. These findings are worthy of note because of the fact that potential teachers were the population being surveyed, and their data suggests that as a group, they do not seem to discriminate one way or the other toward individuals with disabilities.

The scenario presented in survey question one produced varying answers from participants. One of the participants stated, "It would depend if the noises were a result of the disability. If not, I would kindly ask them to please keep the noise quiet." Many other participants mirrored this sentiment by stating that they would not ask the person to be quiet unless the noises were not related to the disability. This is an interesting response because there is no way to know whether the noises are voluntary or involuntary (aside from asking, which, in this case, is assumed would not happen). This question was designed to find out if participants would feel differently addressing an individual in a wheelchair than they would an individual without a visible disability. Based on the responses of participants, it seems that many participants felt pity toward the individual on account of the wheelchair. This may

carry strong implications for a classroom situation, and will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Survey questions one and two are interesting to compare. In survey question one, participants reported that they would most likely agree with Tom's decision to ignore the noises of the person in a wheelchair, or that they would need more information in order to make their decision (i.e. knowing whether the noises were a result of the person's disability). However, in survey question two, the majority of participants agreed with Gina's decision to redirect the customer who cut in front of her in line. Knowing that both the person in the wheelchair and the person cutting in line have a disability, one might question why the majority of participants agreed to ignore one socially unacceptable behavior while agreeing to intervene in another.

It seems that survey questions one and two pose an interesting situation when compared to each other. In the first one, the nature of the disability comes into play because some participants wanted to know if the person could help making the noises. However, in survey question two, not one participant mentioned wanting to know if the individual with Down syndrome cutting in line was a result of his/her disability. The following statements are taken from the same participant and are his responses to survey questions one and two, respectively:

"It would matter on what the nature of the noise was. For

example, if the noise was related to the person's disability, than nothing should be said. But if the noise was unnecessary...then Tom should have said something..."

"...I would ask the person with Down syndrome to wait their turn. It only seems detrimental to allow (people with disabilities) a license to do anything in public. The same rules apply to everyone."

It is possible that being in a wheelchair carries a greater stigma, and therefore participants felt a need to justify their actions more than with a person who was not in a wheelchair, even if this person had a different kind of visible disability. But it is interesting that the participant quoted above stated that, "the same rules apply to everyone" and then explained that depending on the disability, the rules may not necessarily apply.

Survey question three showed that the vast majority of participants believed that John should have helped the woman in the grocery store. This is likely to be because the woman initiated the interaction and although she exhibited some unusual characteristics, this was a non-conflict situation as she was simply asking for help. When compared to survey question one, where interaction would require some corrective action, this situation in survey question three was simply responding to the woman's request. In addition, the potential teachers who participated in this survey are likely to have a strong

desire to help others, and this trait would have come out in this scenario.

For survey question four, it is possible that participants misinterpreted the question. As a comment about survey question four, one participant stated that Matt “could have been nicer.” Another participant wrote that Matt seemed kind of rude toward the student and should have just left him alone. These were not the intended responses, as the character of Matt was not meant to be perceived as rude or inconsiderate. This data may have been compromised because of this misinterpretation.

In survey question five, many participants said they would have helped the woman if she had asked for help, but would probably not initiate helping her independently. This implies that the participants felt they needed more information in order to answer the question properly. There is a pattern in this research where initiating an interaction with a person with a disability seems to be a much bigger leap than giving help when it is requested.

Limitations of study

First, because this study sought to gather people’s perceptions, it must be mentioned that accurately categorizing ideas, thoughts or opinions into categories and percentages can be difficult and may vary depending on the manner in which these constructs are assessed.

Second, this study was only conducted with students enrolled in an Introduction to Education course. This population may have a bias because of similarities in age, courses completed or career goals, although there were a variety of different majors enrolled in this class (according to data collected). In addition, those who enter into the field of education presumably have an inherent desire or need to help others. Assuming this, their data may be bias in the direction of helping individuals regardless of whether they have a disability, simply because it is their nature.

In addition, due to the fact that this was a research project for a master's program, there were time limitations that may have limited the depth and detail in which this project delved.

Finally, it should also be noted that although care was taken to collect the most accurate data, there is always a risk of not getting completely honest reactions and opinions from participants.

In order to help improve upon the research presented in this study, the following suggestions are proposed for future studies:

When possible, there should be a larger group of participants from which to collect data. Having a greater pool of participants will help to gain more perceptions and perspectives from individuals, which will produce a greater collection of comments and opinions.

One should allow for more explanation of reasoning after each

survey question by permitting participants as much time as needed to complete the survey, rather than setting a ten-minute time limit.

Finally, it would be beneficial to observe a group discussion on each question so the researcher(s) could hear the thought processes of participants. This would be especially insightful for sections of the survey (particularly survey question five) where there was a large percentage of neutral votes.

Chapter 6

Implications for Practice

Potential teachers may want to consider the data collected in this project when they begin the journey to become a teacher. Based on findings in this study, potential teachers feel uncertain and often uncomfortable interacting with/confronting an individual who uses a wheelchair. Because it is highly possible that future teachers will have students in their classrooms who use a wheelchair as the primary mode of transportation, future teachers may want to interact with people who use wheelchairs in various environments (public, social, educational) so

as to broaden their experiences and raise their comfort levels.

Individuals who use wheelchairs should be held to the same standards and receive the same amount of respect as those who do not use wheelchairs, and future teachers who are comfortable interacting in these situations are more likely to create a positive, respectful environment.

In addition, if future teachers are nervous about asking someone in a wheelchair to act in a more socially-appropriate way, the risk exists that these individuals may not be held to the same expectations as their peers. A noisy typical student may have structured, consistent consequences, while a noisy student who uses a wheelchair may be excused or pardoned on an inconsistent basis because the teacher cannot determine the intentions (if any) that are taking place. It is recommended that future teachers expose themselves to people who use wheelchairs, in addition to individuals with other kinds of disabilities, so that they feel more confident and comfortable being consistent and fair in their classroom's expectations toward all students involved.

Another important aspect of this research found that participants tended to give help willingly when it was sought out by an individual, but that participants were hesitant to help another when it was not asked for and they were unsure of details and background information. Participants also seemed eager to help in non-conflict situations as opposed to their reluctance to help where conflict was involved. It is

important for teachers and educational professionals to know their students and how those students feel about being helped in various situations; knowing when to step in and when to wait. For general education teachers working in inclusion environments, they should familiarize themselves with their students so they are not hesitant to be involved in conflict situations or situations where they may need to redirect an individual who has a disability.

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Appendix A
Survey Instrument

Experiences with People with Disabilities

Thank you for your cooperation in completing this survey. This data is being collected for research purposes through Ohio University. Completion and return of this survey implies consent to use the data for research purposes. Participation is completely voluntary and all information will remain completely anonymous. Please read each question, select an answer that best describes your opinion, and take a moment to briefly comment on each situation. Completion of this survey should take no longer than 10 minutes. You must be at least 18 years of age to complete this survey. I greatly appreciate your time in helping me with this survey!

1) Tom went to a movie in a movie theater. The person behind him was making noises that were somewhat distracting to the movie. When Tom turned around he noticed the person was sitting in a wheelchair. Tom decided not to say anything to the person about the noises.

- Do you agree with Tom's actions? (select only ONE)

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

- Please comment briefly what you would do if you were in Tom's situation:

2) Gina was standing in line at a fast food restaurant and was next to order. When it was her turn, a man cut in front of her and began to order. Gina tapped this person on the shoulder to inform him that she had been waiting in line. When the man turned around, she noticed the man appeared to have Down Syndrome. Gina decided to tell the man that she was next and that he needed to wait in line.

- Do you agree with Gina's actions? (select only ONE)

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

- Please comment briefly what you would do if you were in Gina's situation:

3) John was walking through a grocery store. A woman approached him and asked him for help finding an item. The woman appeared very nervous, continuously fidgeted with her hands and would not look him in the eye. John decided he did not feel comfortable in the situation and walked away.

- Do you agree with John's actions? (select only ONE)

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree
Strongly Disagree

- Please comment briefly what you would do if you were in John's situation:

4) Matt was sitting on a chair and reading a paper in a building while waiting for his friend to come out of class. A male student about his age sat down in the chair next to him and began having a conversation with himself under his breath. Matt looked at the man, said, "How's it going?," and continued reading his paper.

- Do you agree with Matt's actions? (select only ONE)

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree
Strongly Disagree

- Please comment briefly what you would do if you were in Matt's situation:

5) Sara was at the mall with her friend. A woman was walking through a crowded cafeteria while carrying numerous shopping bags. Sara was going to offer to help, but then figured that if the woman needed help she'd ask for it. So Sara and her friend continued walking.

- Do you agree with Sara's actions? (select only ONE)

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree
Strongly Disagree

- Please comment briefly what you would do if you were in Sara's situation:

About the Participant:

Are you (please circle one): Male Female

Formal course work (please check the most appropriate answer):

- ___ 1 class
- ___ 2-3 classes
- ___ 4 or more classes
- ___ field experience with people with disabilities

Major:

What is your major? _____

What is your minor? (if applicable) _____

If you are an education major, please indicate your specific major:

- Early childhood
- Middle Childhood
- Special Education
- AYA
- Multi-Age

Other experiences (please check all appropriate answers):

___ Volunteered or worked with people with disabilities (e.g. Special Olympics,
school tutor/peer helper, friend with a disability)

___ Relative with a disability

___ Other (please briefly explain) _____

Appendix B

Graphs of Survey Question Results

1. Likert Scale

Figure 1.1

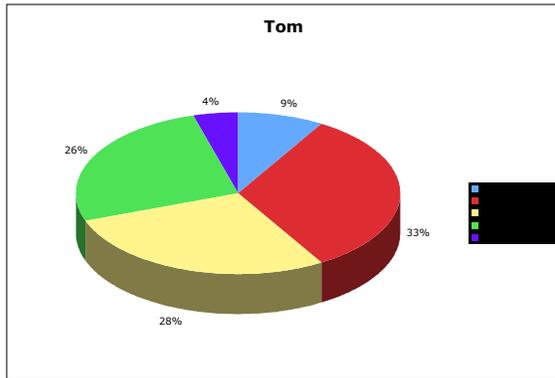


Figure 1.2

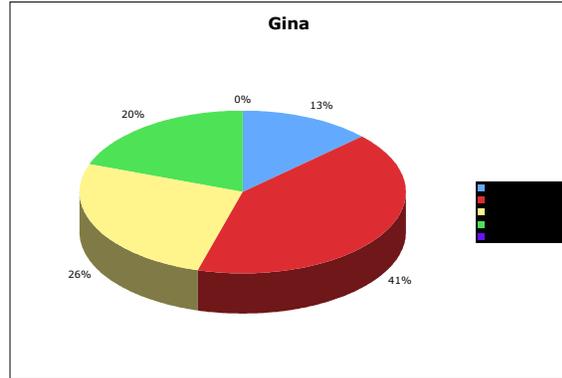


Figure 1.3

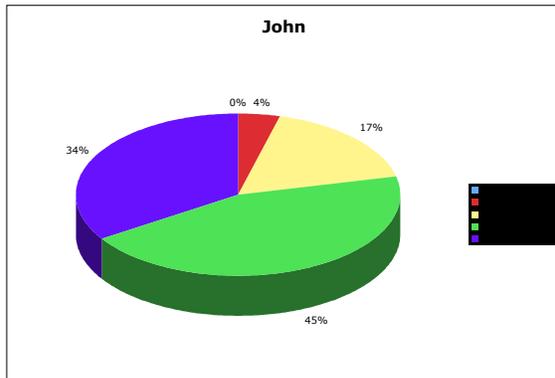


Figure 1.4

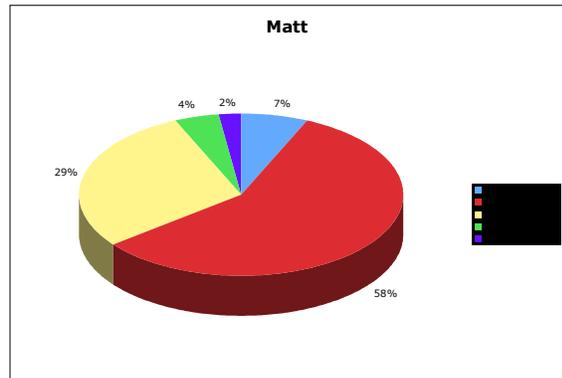
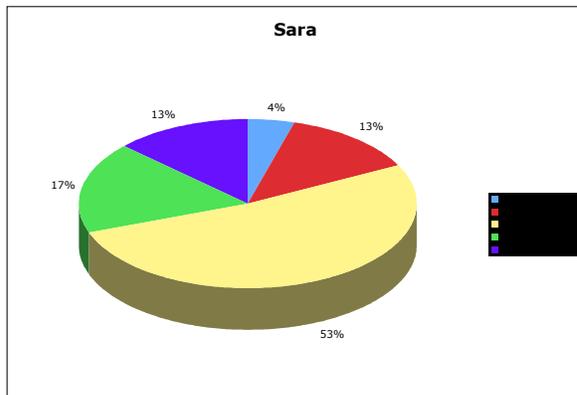
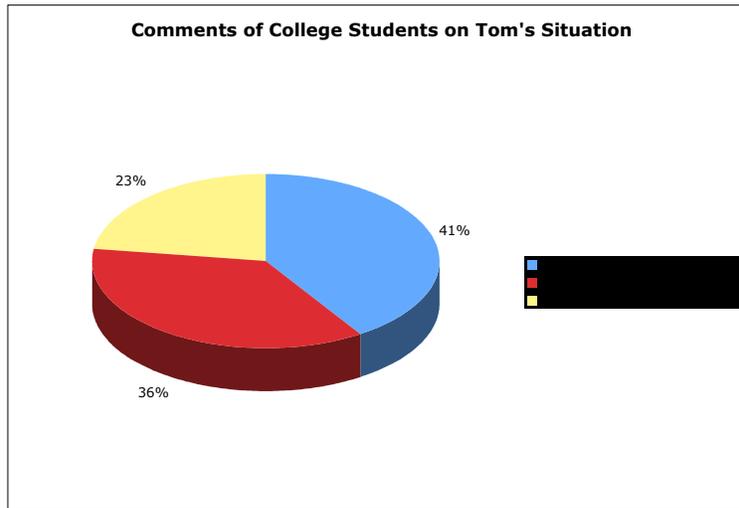


Figure 1.5



2. Nature of Disability is a Factor

Figure 2.1



3. Participants who would ignore or interact with the person with the disability (Based on written comments)

Figure 3.1

