Ending the Stigma Cycle

Maricela May, *Ph.D. Student*

Adult, Professional, and Community Education, Texas State University

The Issue

According to The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD), 7% of college students who identify as needing an accommodation for a learning disability do not inform the college they attend with this information (Horowitz et al., 2017, p. 5). Not disclosing this information can lead to a low rate of college completion and lack of knowledge of workplace accommodations (Horowitz et al., 2017). Research in this area attributes non-disclosure to low self-esteem, fear of being perceived as lazy or unintelligent, wanting to create an identity beyond their disability, and the general stigma surrounding having a learning disability (Gerber, 2011; Horowitz et al., 2017). Non-disclosure is not a far-fetched cry to help shed the stigma of a learning disability. Horowitz et al. (2017) reported that 33% of educators believe that what is deemed a learning disability or attention issue is laziness. McKinney and Swartz (2021) and Sniatecki et al. (2015) both discussed that physical disabilities are positively looked upon in academic and workplace environments but mental illness and learning disabilities hold negative attitudes and social stigmas (McKinney & Swartz, 2021; Sniatecki et al., 2015). So where does this leave adults entering the workforce? Working-age adults with a learning disability are two times more likely to not have a job compared to their peers without a disability (Horowitz et al., 2017). Moreover, like college students, when given the opportunity, some adults will choose not to disclose their

learning disability to avoid the risk of "misunderstanding, stigma, negative self- esteem issues, and social isolation reminiscent of the school-age years" (Gerber, 2011, p. 2). Only 19% of young adults with a learning disability will report their disability to their employer with only 5% receiving accommodations in the workplace (Horowitz et al., 2017). This is a phenomenon that has been reduced to statistics as mentioned (Horowitz et al., 2017) and has limited empirical data to provide evidence-based practices or information with efficacy about what can be done for adults with a learning disability (Gerber, 2011). How would these young adult lives be different if the stigma of a learning disability were nonexistent?

Perpetuating the Stigma

Laws to help to support and services for children and adults with disabilities are not adequately funded. It is found that only 16% of the costs associated with special education are covered (Horowitz et al., 2017). The percentage will continue to drop if policy makers, college administrators, learning advocates, and educators do not address this issue. College students and young adults entering the workforce will continue to think something is "wrong" with them or that they are "dumb." As adult educators, not addressing this will only continue the phenomena of the social stigma surrounding a learning disability perpetuating the idea that those with a learning disability are "lazy and unintelligent." Adult education literature confirms this, in academics (Sniatecki et al., 2015) and in the workplace (Clark, 2006; McKinney & Swartz, 2021). Addressing the social stigma that comes with a learning disability is an imperative so that those with these diagnoses, and other hidden diagnoses, will no longer be branded by their diagnosis and can identify as something other than their disability.

Transforming Our Approach

When diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) were discussed in adult education and human resource development (HRD), the conversations primarily revolved around sensory and physical disabilities (Clark, 2006) and racism, sexism, and capitalism (Bierema & Callahan, 2014, Byrd, 2009). As we have progressed and learned more about DEIA, adult education, and additionally HRD, incorporated invisible disabilities, including learning disabilities, to the conversation (Byrd & Scott, 2018). The progress in the DEIA conversations helped create a shift in perspective from a performance-based philosophy to a strengths-based philosophy; a key tenet of critical HRD (Bierema & Callahan, 2014). The socially conscious perspective of critical HRD rejects natural social divisions, values democratic implementation of HRD, considers diverse stakeholders, and knows all stakeholders have a voice (Bierema & Callahan, 2014). The slow boil of critical HRD and DEIA over the last decade has not only set the stage for adult educators and organizational leaders to thoughtfully look at what inclusion should look like at their organization or at a higher education institution, it finally brought invisible disabilities like learning disabilities to the forefront of the inclusion conversation (Sniatecki et al., 2015). Performance-based commodities are slowly being phased out as the measuring stick for the value a person brings and are being replaced with adult learning needs and autonomy (Bierema & Callahan, 2014; Mishra & Cousik, 2021). This shift not only helps develop a more inclusive environment for adults in college and in the workplace, but it will also educate our adult workforce of what inclusion should truly look like and begin shedding the stigma of having a learning disability.

Be a Change Agent

The critical aspect of removing performance-based goals is how adult educators can begin to help shed the stigma of having a learning disability. To begin that process, I have incorporated three key aspects of disability inclusion in my classroom: (1) lead with humility, (2) build authentic relationships, and (3) solve problems with consensus building (Moore et al., 2020). Incorporating these key aspects into my teaching has allowed me to move beyond traditional exams to check for understanding and involve the students in the process of their learning and how they would prefer to learn. This has allowed me to really know my students and to adjust to their learning needs. These small but significant changes have made my students comfortable enough in my classroom to personally disclose their learning disability to me. With this disclosure, there is understanding and safety for the students to be themselves so that they can understand how to be the best learner they can be.

How can you do same? Please consider the following:

1. How can I lead with humility? Do I feel the need to know the answer, and why is that important for me?

2. Do I allow space in my classroom for students to ask questions without judgment?

3. Do I take the time to know my students? Do I call them by name? Do I follow-up and ask how they are doing?

4. How can I involve my students in their own learning?

REFERENCES

Bierema, L., & Callahan, J. L. (2014). Transforming HRD: A framework for critical HRD practice. *Advances in Developing Human Resources, 16*(4), 429-444.

Byrd, M.Y. (2009). Telling our stories of leadership: If we don't tell them they won't be told. *Advances in Developing Human Resources, 11*(5), 582-605.

Byrd, M. Y., & Scott, C. L. (2018). *Diversity in the workforce: Current issues and emerging trends (*2nd ed.). Routledge.

Clark, M. A. (2006). Adult education and disability studies, an interdisciplinary relationship: Research implications for adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly, 56*(4), 308-302.

Gerber, P. J. (2011). The impact of learning disabilities on adulthood: A review of the evidenced-based literature for research and practice in adult education. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 45*(1), 31-46.

Horowitz, S. H., Rawe, J., & Whitaker, M. C. (2017). The state of learning disabilities: Understanding the 1 in 5. [Executive Summary]. *National Center for Learning Disabilities*. https://www.ncld.org/research/state-of-learning-disabilities/

McKinney, E. L., & Swartz, L. (2021). Employment integration barriers: Experiences of people with disabilities. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 32*(10), 2298-2320.

Mishra, P., & Cousik, R. (2021). Making pandemic response disability inclusive: Challenges and opportunities for organizations. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 14,* 76-80.

Moore, J. R., Hanson, W. R., & Maxey, E. C. (2020). Disability inclusion: Catalyst to adaptive organizations. *Organization Development Journal, 38*(1), 89-105.

National Center for Health Statistics. (2021, October 20). Disability and functioning. *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.* https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/disability.htm

Sniatecki, J. L., Perry, H. B., & Snell, L. H. (2015). Faculty attitudes and knowledge regarding college students with disabilities. *Postsecondary Education and Disability, 28*(3), 259-275.

BIOGRAPHY

MARICELA MAY *is a PhD student in the Adult, Professional and Community Education program at Texas State University. Her research interests include faculty professional development, faculty transfer of learning, and incorporating a culturally responsive pedagogy in the higher education classroom to create an inclusive learning space. She is also a faculty member at Austin Community College, Austin, TX.*