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Experiencing School: An Exploratory, Multimethod Study of the
Perceptions of Secondary Teachers, Advocating Parents and
Mainstream Students with Learning Difficulties

Thesis submitted by

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Education
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STATEMENT OF ACCESS

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STATEMENT OF SOURCES

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been Acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

This research was conducted within the guidelines of “The National Health and Medical Council Statement on Human Experimentation and Supplementary Notes”. The research received ethical clearance from the James Cook University Experimentation Ethics Review Committee.

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THE CONTRIBUTION OF OTHERS

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Use of Infrastructure External to JCU

An Education Queensland office in Brisbane was used to conduct interviews in Phase Two.

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The JCU server hosted the website to disseminate the survey instrument.

Extensive use was made of the services and infrastructure of the Off-Campus library unit throughout my entire candidature.

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ABSTRACT

Students with learning difficulties are those with, 'short or long term difficulties in literacy, numeracy and learning how to learn'(Education Queensland, 1996, Introduction). They are the largest group of special needs students and consistently fail and underachieve in secondary school. Students with learning difficulties are also disproportionately represented in the juvenile justice and mental health systems, and as the long term unemployed.

Despite these negative outcomes, little research has focused on this group either within Australia or internationally with the majority of research in the field concentrated in the primary school. Little comprehensive research has been undertaken with students with learning difficulties in the secondary school setting. The purpose of this exploratory, multimethod research was to address this gap. It aimed to examine the school experiences of mainstream students with learning difficulties in Queensland secondary schools by documenting the attitudes and understanding of secondary teachers together with the lived experiences of the students themselves and parents who advocated on their behalf.

This research was conducted within the transformative emancipatory paradigm of disability which emphasises advocacy, involvement and improvement of the everyday lives of the marginalised group (Oliver, 1996). Phase One utilised a web-based survey, which collected data from 280 secondary teachers employed in government and nongovernment schools. The sample reflected the proportion of teachers engaged in each sector. The survey instrument was constructed from previously administered surveys and was evaluated by three experts in the field. A five-point Likert scale collected attitudinal data, while a separate question evaluated teacher understanding of the characteristics of students with learning difficulties based on the literature in the field. Data were subjected to Rasch analysis and Rasch scaled values for individual demographic indicators were established. Qualitative data were linked to these same Rasch scaled values for selected demographic groups.

Findings indicated that the majority of teachers sampled had negative attitudes towards students with learning difficulties and no discernable differences were found among demographic groups. Teachers' understanding was also uniformly low across the sample with the exception of those with masters' degrees who exhibited more

extensive knowledge. No correlation was established between teachers' attitudes and teachers' understanding about students with learning difficulties.

Phase Two accumulated qualitative data related to school experiences using semi structured interviews of 17 participants including five teachers selected from the survey, six secondary students with learning difficulties and six advocating parents. Interview schedules were based on findings from Phase One and included questions related to school organisation, collaborative practices and pedagogy. Source material was analysed using NVivo and categorisation. Data were found to support the existing theory associated with students with special educational needs including those with learning difficulties.

Major findings from the triangulation of interview data indicated that teachers failed to recognise mainstream students with learning difficulties and that students experienced inappropriate pedagogy, assessment and curricula. Informants agreed that teachers receive inadequate preservice training and professional development while existing policies exclude most mainstream students with learning difficulties from receiving assistance. Generally, teachers' aides, who assist with some students, lack adequate knowledge and skills. Lack of commitment to collaboration and community characterised teachers' views. In contrast, parents believed that schools should practise collaboration and community, that teachers should have relevant knowledge and that all teachers have an individual responsibility for student outcomes. Students who participated in the study spanned the whole spectrum from disengaged to engaged with school. All students spoke of teachers who helped them at school and who treated them with respect and as individuals.

Consistent with the research paradigm, recommendations have been made to foreground the concerns of participating parents and students. As a researcher with a family member with learning difficulties, my voice has also been included. Recommendations include the encouragement of teachers, through financial incentives, to undertake higher degrees, the linking of an increased number of mandatory special education subjects for preservice generalist teachers with teacher registration as well as the implementation of more extensive and appropriate professional development for practitioners.

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In accordance with the policy of James Cook University School of Education, this thesis has been presented following the rules of the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2001), including the stance taken on prefixes.

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