

A Typology of Disability Harassment in Secondary Schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory study of disability harassment was to develop a typology of disability harassment experiences anchored in the perspectives of students with disabilities who have experienced harassment in urban, suburban, and exurban-rural schools. Based on focus group interviews with four groups of young people with various disabilities and two groups of parents of students with disabilities, the authors identified six major types of disability harassment and placed them on a continuum from least assertive to most aggressive. For each of the six types, signature behaviors were identified as was their respective frequency. Based on their findings, the authors propose several practical strategies for secondary schools (Grades 6–12) aimed at helping to address the multiple faces of this formidable challenge.

Keywords

parents of students in special education, school-based discrimination, secondary school administration, secondary school harassment, transition of students with disabilities

Over the past three decades there has been a rapidly growing body of literature that provides anecdotal accounts of harassment of young people with disabilities in a wide variety of social situations (Holzbauer & Berven, 1996). Among these accounts are vignettes of disability harassment that include an adolescent boy with a facial disfigurement due to a severe burn in a family situation (Vash, 1981), a child with congenitally deformed legs in school (Wright, 1983), young adults with learning disabilities at work (Williams, 1993), and a teenage girl with a physical disability in her community (Eisenberg, 1982). Both within and outside of school, Wright provided poignant stories of ridicule, taunts, and unrelenting jeers of students with disabilities by their peers who did not have disabilities. Linn and Rousso (2001) in their work on gender equity in special education also reported that many adolescents with disabilities revealed that they had been teased, stared at, cornered, hit, and ostracized by their peers—and occasionally by adults—in light of their disability and placement in special education classes.

Consonant with the evolution of scholarly study of disability harassment, there have been several definitions of *disability harassment* advanced in the literature (Holzbauer 2002, 2004). As noted by Holzbauer and Berven (1996) in approvingly quoting Crocker's (1983, p. 697) definition of sexual harassment, "No definition will be absolutely complete—it is extremely difficult to encompass every dimension of a problem we are still learning about." Caveats aside, for the purpose of this study disability harassment is defined as "school-related harassment conduct on the basis of disability . . . that conveys aversion, denigration, or

hostility toward a student in special education because of that person's disability" (Holzbauer, 2008, p. 166).

Disability harassment has long been reported in the literature. In Holzbauer's recent (2008) study, K-12 teachers of students in special education reported that they frequently observed disability harassment. In the study a total of 90 teachers in special education from an urban public school system responded to 15 items adapted from a workplace disability harassment scale he had earlier developed (Holzbauer, 2002). Holzbauer found that 97% of the teachers had observed school-related disability harassment of students in special education, with 56% reporting many observations of such conduct.

As widely reported in the literature, school-related disability harassment can create offensive, hostile, and intimidating school environments that can have a very negative effect on school performance and educational opportunities for students in special education. As two senior officials in the U.S. Department of Education, Cantu and Heumann (2000, p. 1), put it, "Disability harassment can seriously interfere with the ability of students with disabilities to receive the education critical to their advancement." The harmful psychosocial stress of being devalued in harassing school situations is almost always a deeply humiliating experience in which

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students face a choice between getting help and “keeping the secret” (Hamilton, Alagna, King, & Lloyd, 1987; Holzbauer & Berven, 1996). In such embarrassing situations, students with disabilities sometimes will blame themselves and often underreport their experiences of harassment in light of fears of not being believed, little being done if they report experiences to school personnel, and retaliation (Holzbauer, 2004). Parents of students in special education are reluctant to file complaints of harassment in their local school districts (Weber, 2007).

A report by Hergert (2004) found that parents of students with disabilities were very aware that harassment is disproportionately targeted toward children who are seen as different and less powerful and, furthermore, that children with disabilities are even easier targets if they are small or awkward. Sheard, Clegg, Standen, and Cromby (2001) surveyed parents of 54 students with severe intellectual disabilities who had recently left school and found that more than one half of these parents emphasized the harassment their children had faced.

Not only do many individuals with disabilities drop out of high school because of harassment (Cantu & Heumann, 2000) but those who continue often face an array of challenges as they transition from secondary school settings into postsecondary education and the adult workforce—even with support from special education and vocational rehabilitation (Hanley-Maxwell, Szymanski, & Owens-Johnson, 1998). With respect to the transition to adulthood, students with disabilities may experience social exclusion, suffer low academic achievement, stop attending school, make few attempts to seek gainful employment, and sometimes drop out of the workforce altogether if they experience harassment in their first or second job (Holzbauer, 2004). Stigma by student peers and educators in secondary schools remains a gateway to disability harassment (Corrigan et al., 2000; Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson 1988), which can thwart a goal of special education and vocational rehabilitation—that is, a successful transition to higher education and employment—for students with disabilities (Rubin & Roessler, 2007).

There is a growing body of research showing the experience of disability harassment as one of the barriers for individuals with disabilities in securing and maintaining employment. According to Holzbauer (2004), young people with disabilities who experience harassment in secondary schools are at great risk of achieving their transitional goals of successful employment in the short run and in the long run. In his research study on the prevalence of work-related disability harassment of 52 adults who were eligible for services from a state vocational rehabilitation agency in the Midwest, he found that the experience of harassment for these workers with disabilities was widespread (Holzbauer, 2002). Other studies have found that a major barrier to staying employed is disability harassment

(Chan, McMahon, Cheing, Rosenthal, & Bezyak, 2005; McMahon et al., 2006).

Notwithstanding anecdotal accounts in the literature, there is little research that captures the myriad faces of disability harassment in middle school and high school—especially research that draws on the voices of young people with disabilities as well as the parents of students with disabilities. Nested in this context, the overarching purpose of this study was to develop a typology of disability harassment experiences anchored in the perspectives of individuals who have been recipients of harassment (Holzbauer & Berven, 1996). Specifically, we sought to identify the major types of disability harassment in secondary public schools (Grades 6–12), including the specific behaviors associated with each type along with the frequency of these behaviors. The following research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: What are the major types of disability harassment described by individuals with disabilities and parents of individuals with disabilities and what are the distinctive behaviors associated with each type?

Research Question 2: How frequently do these behaviors find expression?

Method

A qualitative focus group design (see Stewart & Shamdasani, 1998) was chosen as the research method that guided the study on the grounds that disability harassment in secondary schools is a sensitive topic. Focus groups have been used for sensitive topics with children (Hoppe, Wells, Morrison, Gillmore, & Wilsdon, 1995), status of the sexual conduct of young women (Overlien, Aronsson, & Hyden, 2005), and status of low-income populations (Jarrett, 1993). The following sections discuss recruitment of the groups, the composition of the focus groups, focus group procedures, moderators' roles, data analysis, and data validation.

Recruitment Sources

Morgan (1996) stressed the importance of identifying sources used in locating potential participants for focus groups and information about recruitment procedures. Young people and parents from urban, suburban, and exurban-rural public school districts within southeastern Wisconsin were considered in this study. The most effective method of recruitment proved to be when the lead researcher attended three transition programs and two resource fairs that were designed explicitly for young people with disabilities and their parents. On each occasion he handed out informational flyers to willing young people and/or parents. The flyer stated, “I am doing a study of how young people with disabilities are

treated in middle school or high school." If they expressed interest, potential participants were selected after an assessment of their eligibility. Another major source for recruitment was offices for disability services on local college campuses in southeastern Wisconsin. A director and staff at one of these offices greatly helped in facilitating the recruitment on that campus of students with disabilities for the focus groups. Cash incentives were another recruitment strategy, which enhanced participation. As Morgan (1998, p. 68) put it, "money matters in recruitment." Recruitment flyers stated that each participant would receive \$50 at the end of the session.

Focus Group Composition

The selection of participants for the focus groups was purposeful (Morgan, 1996; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1998). The entire sample, which consisted of six focus groups, came from the greater metropolitan area of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Young people. Morgan (1996) stressed the importance of accurate and reflective recall from focus group participants in situations covering harmful personal experiences. Accordingly, the overall sample included four focus groups of adolescents and young adults. Across the four groups, a total of 18 individuals (ages ranging from 14 to 26) were selected. Seven of the 18 participants were ages 14 through 17 (having been selected based on their ability to recall their school experiences), and 11 group participants were adults, that is, 18 through 26 years of age. The reasoning behind this sampling strategy was that (a) some participants had their secondary education extended until they were 21, if stipulated, in their individual education plan and (b) some participants were no longer in secondary school but could still clearly recall their secondary school experiences regarding harassment with a high degree of accuracy as determined by their responses via phone conversations and e-mails. The latter is likely due to the personal impact of their experiences, in some cases, after years of reflecting on them. (Although we found that the older adolescents and young adults were, in general, more articulate than the younger adolescents were, there were two major exceptions. A female participant and a male participant, both of whom were 14 years old at the time of their focus group meeting, made especially meaningful contributions to the study.) The 18 participants in the study included 12 individuals with a specific learning disability (SLD), 4 with cerebral palsy, 1 with autistic spectrum disorder, and 1 with a traumatic brain injury.

The challenges of segmentation and topic sensitivity were addressed in the design of the study. Gender, which was evenly divided with 9 males and 9 females among the 18 young people in the study, was chosen as a segmented population. Although race was not considered a segmented

group, 3 people of color were included. Focus groups divided by gender helped the moderators maintain focus on the topic (Morgan, 1996) and encouraged female participants to openly address such sensitive matters as the interaction of disability and sexual harassment. Secondary students and young adults were mixed in two of the focus groups by gender.

Parents. In light of factors often associated with parental and youth dynamics in focus groups, Stewart and Shamdasani (1998) cautioned against including parents of adolescents in the same focus group as their children on the grounds that the presence of parents may reduce the willingness of adolescents to speak out and express their feelings. Accordingly, two focus groups in the study included 14 parents of children with disabilities. To be selected, a single criterion was used: Their child had attended secondary school (Grades 6–12). The disabilities of their children included intellectual disabilities (5), SLD (4), cerebral palsy (3), and autistic spectrum disorder (2). Of their children, 8 were males and 6 were females. The parents were told that they would be asked to identify harassment experiences that they had direct knowledge of or that their children had specifically reported to them.

Size is yet another important variable in focus groups, especially with respect to special populations discussing sensitive topics (Hoppe et al., 1995; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1998). According to Morgan (1996), smaller is better. The average number of participants across all six focus groups was 5.3 with a range of 3 to 8 members. Three overlaps existed of young people and their parents, with at least several weeks in between their respective group meetings. There was not any echoing of reports of disability harassment except for one account of a cruel prank independently described by a daughter and her mother, which enhanced the validity of that experience. In summary, this research study consisted of six focus groups (four young people groups and two parent groups) and totaled 32 participants.

Focus Group Procedures

A much-debated question in qualitative research concerns the degree of standardization of procedures and the set of questions that are posed (Morgan, 1996; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1998). Most scholars agree that the best decisions are based on conscious assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of standardization with regard to the goals of the particular project. For this study, each focus group meeting consisted of a time frame of 90 minutes. The proceedings were audio and video taped with the permission of the participants for purposes of obtaining an accurate record of each event that included both affective and nonverbal communications. Two disability organizations in metropolitan Milwaukee gave permission to conduct the focus group

sessions at their locations: the area's center for independent living and a district office of the mandated agency for state-wide protection and advocacy for people with disabilities. A local area college also provided rooms in its student union for attending student participants with disabilities. We conducted two focus groups at each of the three highly accessible facilities.

Focus group discussions require guidance and direction to remain focused on the topic of interest. To that end, the lead researcher used a type of design described by Morgan (1993) that organized the interview guide according to a funnel pattern, namely, one that begins with open-ended questions and then proceeds to a fixed core set of questions. This has the advantage of maintaining comparability across groups in each discussion. Following the design of Morgan, the lead researcher incorporated a set of a priori guided interview questions that had been developed from a survey questionnaire in a research study of observed disability harassment by teachers in special education (see Holzbauer, 2008). Sources of these types of observed harassment were derived from a review of the professional literature on disability, bullying in school and work situations, court cases, and legal guidelines. Whereas these fixed questions (which were slightly modified for the parent groups) made up a significant part of each session, open-ended questions were also used extensively across all of the focus groups.

Roles of Focus Group Moderators

There has long been an ongoing debate over what should be the amount of structure and direction that focus group moderators should employ (Morgan, 1996). Although the answer can only be determined by the research agenda, the types of information sought, and the specificity of the information required (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1998), the moderators followed the overall design of Morgan (1993), namely, incorporating a directed approach with encouraging open discussion. Since it was anticipated that some participants might need emotional support, two moderators with training and experience in group work conducted each of the six focus groups on the grounds that the participants were a special population dealing with a sensitive topic (Hoppe et al., 1995; Race, Hotch, & Packer, 1994). The moderators were remunerated for their service.

Data Analysis

Before undertaking data analysis, the lead researcher identified a professor at a major research university with extensive experience in qualitative inquiry to become a full-fledged partner in the study. By choosing a positioned subject approach (Conrad, Haworth, & Millar, 1993), which was used to inform the data analysis in concert with sifting and

winnowing through evidence that included direct quotations (Conrad & Serlin, 2006), they decided to conduct the data analysis in two distinct sets: first individually and then collaboratively.

First research question. The aim of the study is to identify the major types of disability harassment and their signature behaviors. The analysis of the data comprised four stages:

1. Individual data analysis: Before data analysis was initiated, individuals with transcription and typing skills provided verbatim accounts based on the entire audio and video recordings of the six focus groups for the historical record. All six interview transcripts were read by each of us and all of the DVDs were viewed separately. We each then prepared a separate analysis of the data collected during the six focus group interviews. More specifically, we each focused on identifying the major types of disability harassment and, for each, the signature behaviors associated with the respective type. We then prepared a separate analysis of the data from the six focus groups and independently wrote up our findings across the interviews.
2. First joint data analysis aimed at identifying the major types of harassment: We subsequently devoted an extensive amount of time in face-to-face dialoging across our respective preliminary findings with a major focus on identifying the major types of harassment and a secondary focus on the behaviors associated with each. After extensive discussion, we jointly developed a tentative typology of disability harassment—along with a preliminary list of behaviors associated with each type. The resulting typology went far beyond our individual analyses. While we had initially identified three and four types of harassment, only two of the seven types of harassment that had been initially identified survived our joint analysis.
3. Individual data analysis—further testing of the major types of harassment and major behaviors associated with each: Both of us reviewed each transcribed interview in light of the emerging typology. Next, we made modifications in the typology and in associated behaviors.
4. Second joint data analysis—further testing of the major types of harassment and the major behaviors associated with each: We then made several major changes both in the identified types and a number of changes and additions in the number of the behaviors associated with each. Throughout this dialogical undertaking, we returned numerous times to the interview transcripts for purposes of

refining harassment types and accompanying behaviors. We concluded our joint analysis once theoretical saturation had been reached.

We followed these steps for purposes of delineating, organizing, and presenting the findings: (a) consulting *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (1999) for accurate characterizations of distinctive behaviors; (b) coding all expressive examples of disability harassment for the six focus groups according to a system suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (1992), such as harassment reports from the first parent's focus group were coded as 1P01, 1P02, and so forth, and reports from the second [young] women's focus group were coded as 2W01, 2W02, and so forth; (c) systematically categorizing each coded example indicative of a distinctive behavior under a major type; and (d) selecting the more illustrative descriptive quotations for each behavior plus checking the original audio and video recordings to ensure accuracy.

Second research question. We used simple descriptive (noninferential) statistics to ascertain how frequently these behaviors gave expression to the major types of disability harassment. Data included counting the results of numerical frequencies of the coded reported expressions in different dimensions of the behaviors found under the types of harassment (Fink, 1995). We originally established three frequency categories for each report within a distinctive behavior: once, a few times (2–5), and many times (6 or more).

Data Validation

The lead researcher acted only as an observer during the focus group sessions to reduce potential research bias and reactivity (Maxwell, 1998). To reduce other forms of research bias and reactivity in qualitative research, we anchored our findings in several validity tests identified by Maxwell. They included searching for discrepant evidence (identifying different types of harassment and discovering another group of harassers other than originally anticipated), feedback (securing the services of a qualitative data analysis researcher who was unfamiliar with the problem under study), and comparison (initially analyzing the data separately and independently by both of us before coming together).

Results

Emergence of Disability Types and Signature Behaviors Under Each Type

Each of the focus groups reported widespread disability harassment that cut across the categories of disability, gender, and racial ethnicity. In terms of the first research question,

we identified six major types of disability harassment and, for each type, the signature behaviors. Based on our analysis across the major types, we eventually chose to place each of the six types in one of three overall cultures of disability harassment that unexpectedly evolved during our data analysis: marginalization (relegation of a fringe group to the sidelines), denigration (defamation of a group), and intimidation (inducement of fear in a group and contemptuous treatment of that group). The six major types of disability harassment we identified are as follows: pigeonhole (to assign to a specific and often oversimplified degrading category), abandon (to withdraw protection, support, or help; to desert), manipulate (to influence deviously, to falsify for personal gain), belittle (to represent or speak of a person as unimportant), scare (to frighten, to alarm), and violate (to rudely disturb or do harm to a person). These cover an assertive-aggressive continuum of types from the least assertive to the most aggressive. Under each type are signature behaviors that range from the least severe to the most severe. The three overarching cultures, the six types of disability harassment, and the signature behaviors under each type are displayed in Table 1.

We provide direct quotations from focus group participants across the sample of the distinct behaviors under each of the six major types of disability harassment—from least assertive (pigeonhole) to most aggressive (violate). The following representative examples in Table 2 give concrete expression to and illuminate the findings by way of a narrative presentation.

Frequency of Harassment Type

Within each of the six major types of disability harassment, our second research question asks how frequently each of these behaviors finds expression. We analyzed the data with respect to this question from three different perspectives. Expression One: The frequency counts of the evidential data are recorded in Table 3. The grand total equals 166 expressions of disability harassment from the focus group participants within the 28 distinct behaviors identified. From the three frequency categories of behavior expression, the category *once* was eliminated because of its singularity of frequency (see the behavior "trip" in Table 3) and was included in the category *a few times* (2 through 5), which counted for 62% of the distinctive behaviors. In turn, 38% came under the category *many times* of 6 or more in which 11 behaviors of harassment are included within this category from most frequent (name call) to least frequent (goad). The sum of the 11 behaviors ($N = 100$) makes up 60% of all the expressions within the 28 behaviors. Expression Two: All expressions of disability-related harassment in secondary schools, whether they came from student peers, school staff, or both, were recorded in the six focus group meetings.

Table 1. Three Cultures, Six Major Types of Disability Harassment, and Behaviors Within Each Type

Culture of Marginalization		Culture of Denigration		Culture of Intimidation	
Pigeonhole	Abandon	Manipulate	Belittle	Scare	Violate
Patronize	Ignore	Trick	Tease	Taunt	Trip
Gawk	Neglect	Feign	Needle	Prey	Steal
Spurn	Shun	Entrap	Name call ^a	Threaten	Shove
Scorn	Ostracize	Goad	Gossip	Torment	Hit
		Slander	Mimic		
			Ridicule		
			Mock		

a. Examples for this behavior include epithets and/or slurs.

Table 2. Direct Quotations for Representative Behaviors (in Italics) Within the Types of Disability Harassment

Six Types	Behaviors With Direct Quotations
Pigeonhole	<i>Patronize:</i> A high school participant with an SLD said, "regular ed students will talk really slow to students in special ed as if they wouldn't get it if they didn't [over-enunciate]. D o y o u u n d e r s t a n d?" <i>Scorn:</i> A graduating college senior with an SLD stated, "It was like I was less of a person because I wasn't as smart as the other [high school] students. I could feel that it was there, from teachers too, but it was silent."
Abandon	<i>Ignore:</i> "Teachers tolerate and ignore bullying of students in special education while administrators make excuses. I was constantly going to the administrator, not getting satisfaction at the middle school. It was just terrible for her" [a daughter with an SLD]. <i>Shun:</i> "If you were a student in special ed, your reputation went down the tubes. So don't expect to be invited to any kind of party or anything. You're not going anywhere. Have fun staying home with your parents for the rest of your high school career."
Manipulate	<i>Entrap:</i> "When he [her son with an ID] gets in trouble, he doesn't know how to give the perception of [knowing] what happened and he is always the one to get the dirty stick in the end" with administrators. <i>Goad:</i> A college junior with severe CP stated, "My speech therapist in middle school wasn't very nice to me, very rude. [She] tried to force me to communicate in ways that were inappropriate for me. She degraded me."
Belittle	<i>Needle:</i> A participant with a dysgraphia and dyslexia reported that his middle school teacher would say, "Well, you have two parents that are writers. Why can't you do this stuff?" Then she'd kinda wait for the laugh" [from students in the class]. <i>Name Call (Epithets):</i> "It is not just peers who are bullies but teachers working with my son [with an ID], which say incredible things and are harassing him." <i>Name Call (Epithets/Slurs):</i> "Some students do signs to me and other students in special ed" [a gesture of beating their chest with an open-flat-hand-down]. This means "retard." <i>Mock:</i> A participant with dyscalculia recounted, "I had a math teacher who knew that I had a problem and he would call on me anyway. 'What about you; what do you think?' And I would always go: 'I don't know' and there were boys in the back of the class who would go: 'I don't know; I don't know.' They would mock me every time I spoke."
Scare	<i>Taunt:</i> A participant with autism spectrum disorder lamented, "I hate being in special ed because people start making fun of me about how I have a disability. 'Don't sit by him. . . ' They say 'watch your back; he's in special ed; he might have diseases that pass to another person.'" <i>Prey:</i> "There were some people who would actually stand outside the [special ed] room and wait: 'So who's going in the room? Are you in that room?' I don't know how many times I was late. Like, I would hide in the girl's bathroom and wait and then the bell would ring and I would run all the way to the room." <i>Prey/Threaten:</i> "She follows wherever I go. She follows me to the library; she follows me to my class; she calls me names everywhere. I get real mad and want to get up in her face and say something but I don't want to get in her face because she'd tell that I threatened her. Like yesterday, she told me that she was going to beat me up. She is really smart. I'm not smart like she is." <i>Torment:</i> Her son with an ID "had his mouth taped by a teaching assistant in middle school because he wouldn't stop talking. He doesn't have the filters to stop."
Violate	<i>Trip:</i> "Other students would trip me" walking down the halls, related a student with CP. <i>Hit:</i> She detailed accounts of "hitting, choking, kicking, and slamming of her son [with an ID] by a teacher. So the principal called the police. I went the DA. Do you know that the DA did not bring charges? So you feel that they don't care." <i>Hit:</i> In middle school after lunch, he would retreat to a small wooded area on the school grounds. "I would go in there just to get away from everyone and then some people [peers] would come corner me in there and beat me up."

SLD = specific learning disability; ID = intellectual disability; CP = cerebral palsy; DA = District Attorney

Note: Additional indicators of direct experiences are available at <http://holzbaauerandconrad.blogspot.com>.

Table 3. Frequencies of Reported Quotations for Each Behavior Within the Six Major Types of Disability Harassment

Culture of Marginalization		Culture of Denigration		Culture of Intimidation	
Pigeonhole	Abandon	Manipulate	Belittle	Scare	Violate
Patronize: 5	Ignore: 8	Trick: 3	Tease: 3	Taunt: 3	Trip: 1
Gawk: 8	Neglect: 10	Feign: 5	Needle: 4	Prey: 2	Steal: 4
Spurn: 5	Shun: 8	Entrap: 5	Name call: 17	Threaten: 4	Shove: 2
Scorn: 4	Ostracize: 14	Goad: 6	Gossip: 5	Torment: 7	Hit: 8
		Slander: 4	Mimic: 5		
			Ridicule: 7		
			Mock: 7		
Total: 22 (13%)	Total: 40 (24%)	Total: 22 (13%)	Total: 51 (31%)	Total: 16 (10%)	Total: 15 (9%)

Total is N=166 at 100%.

Table 4. Frequencies of Disability Harassment by School Staff (Plus Both School Staff and Student Peers in Bold) Within the Six Major Types of Disability Harassment

Culture of Marginalization		Culture of Denigration		Culture of Intimidation	
Pigeonhole	Abandon	Manipulate	Belittle	Scare	Violate
Patronize: 5	Ignore: 7-1	Trick: 2	Tease: 0	Taunt: 0	Trip: 0
Gawk: 1-1	Neglect: 10	Feign: 2	Needle: 3	Prey: 0	Steal: 0
Spurn: 2	Shun: 2	Entrap: 1-1	Name call: 3	Threaten: 2	Shove: 0
Scorn: 2	Ostracize: 3-1	Goad: 5-1	Gossip: 0	Torment: 2	Hit: 2
		Slander: 0	Mimic: 0		
			Ridicule: 1		
			Mock: 1		
Total: 11 of 22 (50%)	Total: 24 of 40 (60%)	Total: 12 of 22 (55%)	Total: 8 of 51 (16%)	Total: 4 of 16 (25%)	Total: 2 of 15 (13%)

Quotations are included for each distinct behavior and are totaled in numbers and percentages.

Accordingly, experiences of harassment based on disability by school staff or both school staff and student peers are reported for each behavior along with totals within the major types in Table 4. In summary, roughly 37% of the 166 expressions of harassment were placed in the categories of school staff (53) and both school staff and students (8). Expression Three: We also analyzed the results from the unexpected emergence of a cultural perspective on disability harassment during the analysis stage. Frequency of the culture of marginalization is 37% of the quotations and is not far behind the culture of denigration of 44%, which we anticipated would be the highest frequency (Holzbauer, 2008), especially under the harassment type *belittle* with its 51 individual expressions found in Table 3. That leaves the culture of intimidation at 19%.

Discussion

We conclude by examining the extent to which disability harassment in secondary schools is reported, reviewing the results of the first research question for the major types of harassment and their related behaviors, addressing the three

expressions of disability harassment found in the second research question, and discussing implications of the research study.

Ubiquitousness of Disability Harassment

Across disability. Although not explicated as a research question per se, it is important to emphasize the widespread harassment of secondary students with disabilities that cut across the focus groups. Of the 18 young people in the focus groups, 12 indicated they had an SLD. This disability is not considered an obvious one in comparison to other disabilities such as cerebral palsy (4) and intellectual disabilities (5 from the two parent groups), but to other student peers and many of the school staff there was no apparent difference in reporting of experiences of harassment based on any specific disability under the six major types and with regard to the distinct behaviors in order of severity. (A previous study of workplace disability harassment of adults found that there was no inferential statistical association between the experience of harassment and obviousness of disability; Holzbauer, 2002). The research suggests that

individuals with disabilities are often known by others as having disabilities in specific situations, such as in school and at work. Thus they remain vulnerable for harassment even with a less obvious disability, for example, an SLD.

Across gender and race. The gender breakdowns of the young people and the students of parent participants were almost identical. In this study, student peers and school staff alike were found to be equal opportunity harassers regardless of the gender of their targets. The results indicate that the incidence of harassment was only slightly higher within the overall culture of intimidation for males and under the major type manipulate for females in secondary schools; otherwise, there was no meaningful difference. The ubiquitous nature of harassment based on gender also mirrors the results of Holzbauer (2002), who found no statistical relationship between experiencing disability harassment and gender. Three of the young people and four of the children of parents (based on the racial ethnicity of their parents) from the focus groups were likely young people of color, roughly 22% of the total. There were no significant differences in regard to reporting disability harassment based on racial ethnicity.

Across school districts. That disability harassment in public secondary schools cuts across school districts of the entire sample is an important finding of the study. Although we did not originally intend to attain the specific school districts of focus group participants, we were able through indirect means to determine the locations of their districts. In dividing the 32 participants into three groups, 14 came from urban school districts, 14 from suburban districts, and 4 from exurban-rural districts. Across the focus groups interviews, we concluded that there were far greater commonalities than differences between the three categories of school districts in regard to experiences of disability harassment except for the behaviors of neglect (usually by school staff) under abandon and hit under violate, which may be more common in urban school districts. These exceptions are understandable considering that in general many public urban secondary schools are reported to have a higher degree of difficulty in hiring and retaining quality educators and experience more routine fighting between students with and without disabilities. That said, the significant difference was with regard to the parents: Parents from suburban school districts, usually after much effort on their part, had a greater chance of engaging school administrators in solutions to challenges associated with disability harassment.

Major Types of Disability Harassment and Signature Behaviors of Each Type

The development and refinement of a typology of disability harassment came about through the unanticipated synergy between us, which included lively and extended periods of

joint data analysis. Beginning with the first joint data analysis meeting, which lasted an entire day, we eventually found remarkable agreement regarding the identification of the six types of disability harassment along with the designation of a continuum from least assertive to most aggressive across the types as well as the three overall cultures.

The 17 different quotations of reported disability harassment experiences, which are graphically illustrated in Table 2, stand poignantly on their own. These quotations, which represent a 10th of the total number of quotations that could have been used, were identified based on three criteria: (a) they gave meaningful expression to disability harassment; (b) they have a ratio of approximately two student peers to every one school staff as harassers; and (c) they provide insight into experiences that cut across specific disabilities, gender, and younger participants and parents. Specifically, we systematically started with the first type and first behavior and ended with the last type and last behavior in which we placed each of the 166 expressions of disability harassment in one of the major types and then decided where to include the quotable expressions after a distinctive behavior under each type.

Three Expressions of the Frequency of Behaviors

First, we compared the 28 distinctive behaviors of disability harassment (post facto of completing our analyses and reporting the results) to a recent survey study that described 15 specific observations of disability harassment by teachers in special education (Holzbauer, 2008). The frequency of behavior expressions within the category of *many times* (six or more) from most frequent to least frequent in Table 3 included name call (epithets and slurs), ostracize, gawk, hit, ridicule, mock, and torment. By adding the behaviors of feign and mimic with a frequency count of five, these distinctive behaviors constitute 10 of the 15 conduct expressions found in the Holzbauer questionnaire, with seven having identical terms and three being very similar in meaning (gawk/stare, hit/physical aggression, and feign/patronizing aversion)

Second, that 53 of the 166 expressions of disability harassment came from school staff, which covered a hierarchical range of professional school personnel within secondary schools from educational assistants to school administrators, remains perhaps the most daunting of the findings. This fact combined with the eight reports of harassment initiated by school staff and conjoined by student peers, indicates a serious problem has come to light. Since the less assertive types of pigeonhole, abandon, and manipulate represent a higher percentage of harassment behaviors by school staff and staff/student peers in comparison to the more aggressive types (belittle, scare, and violate), student peers are likely to view the less assertive harassment of students with disabilities by

the adults in their schools as a green light for them to join in or engage in more aggressive types of harassment of their peers. To demonstrate this phenomenon, Weber (2007) provided legal evidence in several federal court cases of accounts of disability harassment by school staff in which student peers followed their teachers' examples.

Third, a similar view of the green light phenomenon is seen when evaluating the three cultures of marginalization, denigration, and intimidation in relation to disability harassment in secondary schools. We concluded that within any culture, if individuals are viewed as existing on the margins of that culture, greater denigration is likely to be tolerated leading to intimidation of people within that marginal group and resulting in more aggressive actions toward them.

Implications of the Research Study

We discuss the relationship of disability harassment to transitional risk factors; the impact of harassment on the legal profession, on young people with disabilities, and on their parents; the limitations of the study; recommendations for further research; and practical strategies.

Transition from special education to vocational rehabilitation at risk. Since the transition of students in special education from secondary school to higher education and/or job training to work is seen as key in this field, high academic achievement and age-appropriate social maturity are two fundamental tools needed for success. Yet this study found that many of the young participants reported numerous harassment behaviors by their peers and teachers that are likely to negatively affect their opportunities for academic achievement. Because of peer- or self-imposed social marginalization as a result of harassment, students with disabilities may often lag behind in normal adolescent interpersonal and relationship skill building that takes place during this critical time in their psychosocial development (Szymanski, 1994; Wehman, 1997). This may result in advancing a school culture of denigration, thereby making them even greater targets for peer harassment in their isolation. Many secondary students with disabilities are likely to remain undereducated, behind in ordinary social-interaction levels of maturity, and, accordingly, be at a much greater risk for having a seamless and successful transition. Unless special educators, school administrators, and rehabilitation practitioners seriously examine the impact of stigma that disability harassment can have on individuals with disabilities and implement systematic prevention and intervention methods to reduce the marginality of individuals with disabilities in secondary schools, the laudable goal of meaningful work will continue to be thwarted as students in special education try to move into the adult world of work.

Illegal discrimination, fearful students, and angry parents. Disability harassment is an illegal form of discrimination in

all public schools in this country and is covered under the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (Holzbauer, 2008; Weber, 2007). Weber (2002, 2007) argued that many federal court judges have continued to resist viewing blatant and horrific cases of disability harassment by school educators as a civil rights discrimination issue. Instead, they frequently have ruled that it is simply a matter of writing a different special educational accommodation for the student. In other words, rather than attempt to change a culture of intimidation, they order a change in the student's individual education plan.

Holzbauer (2004) listed three reasons why students with disabilities are fearful of reporting incidents of harassment: (a) they think that they are not likely to be believed (they should when school staff are the ones doing the harassment); (b) they assume nothing will be done (they should when school staff repeatedly minimize or disregard their reports); and (c) they anticipate retaliation for reporting incidents of harassment (they should when school staff often and routinely take the side of student peers without disabilities in harassment incidents and give those students a sense of entitlement to retaliate without having to face serious consequences). The findings indicate that these concerns have become a reality for many of the young people in the study. Is it surprising that many secondary students in special education who experience harassment quietly endure their humiliation as a customary and expected part of their role in life?

If some of these student participants seemed resigned to that fate, the parents, as strong advocates, were angry and frustrated by the failure of school staff, especially administrators, to take effective action to prevent and intervene in incidents of harassment of their school children. This anger was palpable during both parent focus groups. Most were aware of their parental rights and the rights of their children in special education to be free of school-related harassment. However, in most of their cases, it made little difference. It appears that a common tactic taken by many school administrators at the local school and district levels was to avoid or delay responding to these parents that had made or filed formal complaints.

Study limitations. There were several limitations of the study with respect to sampling that were based largely on demographic considerations. To begin with, the study was limited to the southeastern region of Wisconsin, specifically the greater Milwaukee metropolitan area. Other limitations included type of disability (two thirds of the young people were students with an SLD), gender (only two of the parent participants were males), and racial ethnicity (three of the young people were from racial minority backgrounds: two Asian Americans and one Latino).

Research recommendations. To deal with the multiple faces of the problem, special educators, regular educators, school administrators, and rehabilitation professionals should encourage researchers to build on and extend this work. For a typology to be valid, it should be replicable and applicable in different contexts. Future researchers need to replicate this study (but with additional sources of data): (a) by comparing other geographic areas of Wisconsin and other regions of the country; (b) by having young participants be representative of a broader range of disabilities, which is ideally based on a physical genesis and mental-behavioral continuum of disability (Weiner et al., 1988); (c) by recruiting parents who are more evenly divided by gender; and (d) by including participants from more diverse ethnic backgrounds. In addition, they should investigate the kinds of prior coping strategies that were used by targets and parents in secondary school situations (see Holzbauer, 2002, for detailed findings regarding effective strategies of adult recipients of workplace disability harassment). For assistance in earlier prevention of stigma leading to social marginalization, they should attempt to determine the extent and a typology of disability harassment at the elementary school level by similar focus group methodologies that deal with direct experiences of younger participants and parents.

Practical strategies for personnel in secondary schools. Since many targets of disability harassment in transition may prefer to stay home rather than to attend their current secondary school, a postsecondary school, and/or look for work, several strategies are directed toward effective advocacy in this order.

1. Secondary school administrators should insist on a civil and harassment-free environment in their schools through consistent, effective, and even-handed enforcement of all existing school harassment policies, including disability harassment.
2. Special education transition coordinators should provide in-service training for local school administrators, regular and special education teachers, educational assistants, and support staff (school counselors, psychologists, and social workers) on sensitivity awareness and the apparent harmful impact of disability harassment for transitioning students with disabilities. Rehabilitation practitioners and transition coordinators in their role as job developers should do the same with employers, human resource personnel, and line supervisors.
3. School support staff should offer distinctive small support groups for targets of disability harassment and peer harassers (Holzbauer & Berven, 1996; Wright, 1983).
4. Local school administrators should proactively discuss with students with disabilities and their parents their rights under the law, which should

include explaining to parents the complaint process in concrete steps, within and outside of each school district, that they can take to find remedy starting with their principal and ending with the Office of Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education (Holzbauer, 2004).

Conclusion

High school completion, successful transition to postsecondary education and meaningful jobs, and full community integration of young people with disabilities remain major challenges in which disability harassment may often play a major role. Along with high levels of disability harassment, this exploratory study identified a continuum of widely varying harassment experiences of secondary students in special education—expressions reflected in the stigmatizing attitudes and humiliating behaviors of student peers and school staff. Anchored in a typology of disability harassment and specific behaviors under each type, the study illuminates the variegated landscape of disability harassment in secondary schools. It should serve as a beginning foundation for addressing disability harassment in practice as well as inform future inquiry.

This study has put a face on disability harassment in secondary schools. The insidious power of disability harassment rests on educators and student peers who continue to encourage, foster, ignore, or lack sensitivity to this serious problem. Many targets of disability harassment too often continue to keep their experiences a secret because of their humiliating psychosocial impact and by internalizing the ongoing harassment they believe “it’s just the way it is.”

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Bios

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