Tales from the Crip: The Relationship between Stories about Learning Disabilities in Mass Media and Teacher Perceptions and Expectations of Learning Disabled Students

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Abstract

In modern-day Western society, most people believe the disabled community is accorded respect and empathy from its nondisabled counterparts. Inclusivity is now part of our contemporary vocabulary and most people claim they pay attention to the needs of others. But, disabled groups still continue to fight for individual freedoms and identity, despite improvements in accessibility and inclusivity. Regardless of policies in place to give students with learning disabilities (SLDs) the same right to educational achievement and success as those who are non-LD, negatively-driven stories continue to dog elementary school SLDs inside and outside the classroom (Shifrer, 2013). My research investigated the complex relationship between the views of three elementary school teachers of SLDs and portrayals of learning disabilities generated in Western mass media. Although there was no conclusive evidence to determine whether media representations had a significant impact on teacher perceptions and expectations, the data collected suggests media representations may have played a supporting role in shaping teacher perceptions and expectations of their SLDs. A narrative approach was used for this study's methodology, coupled with two theoretical frameworks: crip theory and the theory of intertextuality.

Key Words: Learning disability (LD), inclusivity, mass media, crip theory, qualitative research, LD identity
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1.0 Introduction to Research Study

It is all too common that students with learning disabilities are negatively judged by others according to their labels (Shifrer, 2013). But, like a book, the reader often discovers original and surprising stories behind the front cover and beyond the socio-cultural label of a learning disabled individual. “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are,” insists Canadian writer Thomas King (2003, p.2). Both crip theorist Robert McRuer (2006) and disability researcher Sonali Shah (2013) also support the power of narratives to reveal how cognitive and bodily disability is “negotiated and constructed” by mainstream ideologies and dominant institutions (Shah, 2013, p. 63-64). Learning disabilities (LDs) – defined by the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (2015) as "[affecting] one or more of the ways that a person takes in, stores, or uses information" (p. 1) – can conjure different meanings and embodiments for each of us, not only because of variations in disability types and severity, but also because of the background stories (personal and cultural) that people bring to their interactions with LDs. My research study intends to determine how socio-cultural and mythical stories about learning disabilities are perpetuated in public media, witness accounts and early life experiences, and ultimately ingrained in the perceptions and expectations of homeroom teachers towards their mildly LD students (i.e. students with learning disabilities that require little teacher support). With a primary focus on stories about and references to LD individuals in popular media (e.g. movies, television and literature), my research study investigates how the narratives elementary school teachers read, see and hear inform their beliefs and actions in the classroom.

Contemporary academic literature is brimming with works that discuss the connection between teacher expectations for students with learning disabilities and teacher treatment of – or
attitude toward – LD students (Cameron & Cook, 2013; Clark, 1997; Klassen & Lynch, 2007; Klehm, 2014). Despite the recent shift to more inclusive and flexible academic expectations for disabled students as noted by Shah (2013), teachers continue to struggle to support learning disabled students and do not apply suitable expectations for their individual needs (ETFO, 2002). In terms of LD research, it is more relevant now than ever before to look at the back stories of mainstream elementary teachers. With the use of inclusive and differential educational procedures comes the realization that more LD students are becoming permanent pupils for homeroom elementary teachers (ETFO, 2002). Stories that individuals grow up and live with have a powerful influence on the way each of us views the embodiment of different people and different kinds of intelligence (Valle, Volpitta, Solis & Connor, 2004). To ensure the appropriate management of students with differing abilities, educators should strive to be aware of any biases that might influence impulsive judgments of students – both positive and negative.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The societal stories of learning disabled individuals are featured in a wide variety of media and should not be discounted as unworthy of qualitative research, in part because this subject has not been adequately studied (Perepa & Samsel, 2013). Following in the footsteps of crip theorist Robert McRuer (2006) and disability researcher Sonali Shah (2013), this qualitative research paper intends to reveal how narratives, especially media-generated accounts about LD embodiments are not merely anecdotes centered on one individual, but rather, they are saturated with the “institutions, policies, environments and relationships” that shape an individual (Shah, 2013, p. 83). This paper follows Roland Barthes’s (1968) theoretical notion of a narrative text as
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a plurality of interconnected voices and symbolic codes that the post-structuralist calls a “tissue of quotations” (p. 313) – or, in recent times called *intertextuality*.

Educators are tireless in their efforts to heighten reflexivity and illuminate what Kidder and Born (1998-99) call “the hidden curriculum” (i.e. how students map the words and expectations of teachers onto certain values or attitudes) (p. 41). A teacher’s oral history contains critical information about why and how she/he has come to be sensitive towards specific people and things. Wolfinger (2002) determines that tacit background knowledge directly influences the way individuals interact with each other. Moreover, “the hidden curriculum” is not exclusively located inside the classroom, nor does it solely impact young students. In contemporary society, every individual is constantly inundated with daily sensationalized media accounts that are often unknowingly internalized (McLuhan & Fiore, 1969). In the comprehensive *Picturing Disability*, Bogdan, Elks and Knoll (2012) explain, “Media advertisements and other forms of movie imagery place images of disability before us every day that we do not consider in our conscious minds as sending us messages about disability. They provide a *hidden curriculum* that informs people of all ages that people with a disability are to be feared or pitied or laughed at” (p. 128) (my emphasis). Despite the finding by Perepa and Samsel (2013) that many teachers sampled in their qualitative study deny a connection between stories in popular media and professional perceptions and expectations, it is important that researchers consider how individual views of LDs are shaped in the shadows by normative discourses and narratives that routinely categorize disabled individuals as abnormal and subordinate to their able-bodied counterparts (McRuer, 2006).

Learning disabled characters, both mildly and severely, are found in various media accounts – usually in minor roles/parts – and one-size-fits-all. Whether fictional characters self-
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identify as LD or, more often, exhibit common LD traits (e.g. Ralph Wiggum in *The Simpsons* [Groening, 1989]), the general public is exposed to simplistic, stripped down and stereotypical images of people with learning difficulties on a daily basis. A majority of learning disabled characters are presented as being a combination of laughable and pitiable. In line with disability stereotypes exhibited in the mass media, recent educational research has uncovered how some elementary school teachers laugh about the "stupidity" of their LD students 'behind closed doors' (Valle et al., 2004), and many teachers lavish their LD students with pity (Cameron & Cook, 2013). Both fictional and non-fictional examples of stereotypical and discriminatory portrayals of LD people are found in a variety of mass media – ranging from low-culture (e.g. the summer school students in the movie *Summer School* [Trabulus & Reiner, 1987], the protagonists in the film *Dumb and Dumberer: When Harry Met Lloyd* [Yellin & Miller, 2003] and many more) to high-culture (e.g. the mentally disabled character Lennie in John Steinbeck's [1937] narrative *Of Mice and Men*, the real-life LD individuals described as "insults to adult autonomy" (p.167) in Barbara Arrowsmith-Young's [2012] *The Women Who Changed Her Brain* and several more). It matters not whether one reads books, goes to movies, or watches TV, there is an ongoing stream of stigmatized and monolithic representations of individuals with learning difficulties.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume there are no positive and individualistic images of LD people in popular mainstream media. In fact, there has been a recent explosion of popular media – fiction and non-fiction – that focuses on how and why LD people behave in unique ways. This includes books (e.g. *I Wish I Could Fly Like a Bird!* [Denison & Walley, 1996], *How I Learn: A Kid's Guide to Learning Disability* [Miles, 2014], and *The Short Bus: A Journey Beyond Normal* [Mooney, 2007]), movies (*Charly* [Nelson, 1967], *A Mind of Her Own* [Jones, 2006], and *Taare Zameen Par* [Khan, 2007]), and TV shows (*Glee* [Murphy, 2009].
Along with negative LD stereotypes, my research study probes the educational benefits of positive images of LDs in mass media. According to research conducted by Perepa and Samsel (2013), many teachers agree there are a wide range of educational benefits associated with watching documentaries about students with learning disabilities (SLDs), including general knowledge about their home environments, process of diagnosis and understanding personal daily difficulties of learning disabled students (p. 142).

This paper addresses the complexity and intertextuality woven into the expectations of teachers for LD students. A study of socio-cultural narratives in relation to a teacher’s view of LD students could have both superficial and deep educational implications. The purpose of this study is to enhance teacher awareness and knowledge of the potential buried biases that exist towards students with LDs. There could also be implications for the kinds of texts (i.e. narratives acknowledging the unique identity of individuals with LD and resist normative able-bodied ideology) that Teacher Colleges use to prepare instructor candidates. I do not propose, like others (Ferri, Gregg & Keefe, 2001), to study the effects of past teaching experiences in the classroom. Rather, I explore how socio-cultural narratives sway the current view(s) of mainstream teachers towards LD individuals. It is important to note that even though there are policies in place to give LD students the same right to educational success as those who are non-LD students, negatively-driven stories continue to surround and impact LD students inside and outside the classroom (Shifrer, 2013). Just look into the poignant story of Linda Derbyshire, a mother of a young daughter with mild learning difficulties living in a community that purports to be inclusive of people with special needs. She documents repeated instances where her daughter is looked down upon by others. Derbyshire (2013) asks:
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Is it because of the historical nature of how people with special needs have been treated in the past, this awful legacy of excluding and alienating those perceived as ‘different’? Is it so tightly embedded in our minds and personalities that even the most kind, caring, compassionate and intelligent of people fall foul of treating people with additional needs as an underclass in the way that so many people do, even unconsciously? (p. 34).

My study seeks to untangle and decipher the “tightly embedded” narratives of LD embodiments that play prominently in the life stories of teachers. I am consciously bracketing any preference for – or expectation of – positive and individualistic teacher stories compared to stereotypically negative ones. The revelation of either positive or negative preconceptions about LD students is useful knowledge for educators. My research targets the views of teachers towards students with mild LDs. Recent qualitative studies indicate that many mainstream teachers consider the academic abilities of their SLDs to be limited despite inclusive educational policies (Shifrer, 2013). At the same time, researchers David Cameron and Bryan Cook (2013) explain that students with mild disabilities are frequently mistaken for “their nondisabled peers because they look just like them” (p. 19). Centering my research on mild LDs enables me to investigate a variety of LD stereotypes and generalizations. I also possess a heightened knowledge of less severe LDs, because I myself was diagnosed with several of them.

This research project is interested in formal definitions of learning disabilities prescribed by governmental institutions, as well as the plethora of socio-cultural narratives framing LD embodiments. I use the term “embodiment” in the same way as researcher Athena Goodfellow (2014), who claims that “learning disability as a form of embodiment...is rooted in [an] [individual’s] conception of their mind-body differences in relation to others within their social milieu” (p. 68).
1.2 Research Questions

My primary research question is: In what ways are the perceptions and expectations of three elementary school teachers for their mildly learning disabled students influenced by LD imagery in popular media? My sub-questions are: How do past media portrayals of LDs influence the current views teachers have of their LD students? What strategies do teachers employ in the classroom to debunk the myths of LD people as stupid, pitiful or satirical?

1.3 Overview

Chapter 1 includes my introduction to the relationship between stories and the perceptions and expectations teachers place on LD individuals as a direct result of those stories. I also share my own narrative experience growing up as an LD student. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature and theories related to the relationship between socio-cultural stories and teacher perceptions of LD students. Chapter 3 provides the narrative methodology, including information about the sample participants, limitations of the study and data collection instruments. Chapter 4 identifies the three elementary teachers in the study and describes the data as it addresses the research question. Chapter 5 includes an overview of the study, conclusions, recommendations for practice and further reading and study. References and a list of appendices follow at the conclusion.

1.4 Background of the Researcher

In my own passage through the elementary and secondary school systems, I was the target of criticism from my teachers. They repeatedly said to me, “Max, you are slow, stupid and you don’t understand anything”. Before the age of 12, I was diagnosed with a variety of LDs,
including poor visual-motor integration skills, deficient grapho-motor functioning and, according to my Individual Education Plan (IEP), faulty holistic processing. But, most disheartening – and a childhood burden on me – was the lack of positive encouragement, compassionate understanding and individualized expectations from my school educators. To help LD children acquire an inclusive education is of significant relevance to my value and success as a qualitative researcher. I have experienced first-hand the so-called “inclusive” practices of mainstream teachers, whereby negative expectations and stereotypes of LD students continue unabated.

As a former LD student, I experienced the negative implications of teacher expectations – to be either totally different from or completely the same as my non-LD peers. For most of my student life at elementary school, I was in a mainstream class with intermittent out-of-classroom support and accommodations. I was fortunate to have teachers who integrated me into the regular classroom community. At the same time, I was treated like an outcast in some classes and marooned at the back of the room. Firsthand experience has crystallized for me how inclusive educational policies do not automatically translate into inclusive classrooms. It is important to recognize that policies can change, but the memories and cultural stories teachers and students take along with them in life are all integrated into the way they view the larger world.

The repeated experience of being called dumb and incapable have made me sensitive to the damage of mere words, because they can often hurt more than physical abuse – no matter how untrue they may be. To a young student, especially one with learning disabilities, harsh and negative words can be traumatic and can unjustly contribute to defining oneself as an individual of low self-worth. My life story demonstrates that those labelled “incompetent” are not always who they appear to be or who others say they are. But, my story is also proof of how the opinions of others cling to students and can and often do dog them for the rest of their lives.
In primary and secondary school, I was subjected to the low and fixed expectations of teachers. Despite the fact I was assigned to a mainstream classroom with minor accommodations, I remember many instances in which my teachers gave up trying to guide my comprehension. In a Grade 9 special education class called Learning Strategies, most of my time was spent playing board games, like Monopoly. Although I do not recollect if the words were ever actually articulated, the *vibe* or sentiment I felt from many teachers was this: ‘There is no reason to try anything hard, because you are not smart enough to accomplish it.’ That I was influenced by the negative attitudes of my teachers illustrates the power and danger one’s perceptions can play if they are unknowingly revealed and fully absorbed by others, even when no words are exchanged.

The irony of the Learning Strategies class mentioned earlier is multi-layered and germane to my research topic. The course substituted an academic class and the teacher encouraged students to take all applied high school courses, regardless of their LD severity level and type. It billed itself as a course that would help students cope with their disabilities and become more efficient learners, but it only accomplished the opposite. Students spent most of class time gossiping or playing games with their peers. Learning Strategies replaced the academic French course, which was already difficult for me, but not un-doable. At the time, I felt relieved not to be burdened with French, but upon reflection, I am saddened that my opportunities to challenge myself, gain new skills and grow confidence in a safe school setting were taken away from me by instructors who thought they knew what was best for their mildly LD students – and who viewed all LDs as restrictive deficits. Bestselling author Malcolm Gladwell (2013) contends that dyslexia can be a "desirable difficulty" (p. 102), because it can build an individual's resiliency and creativity in the face of challenging situations. The rationale is that if a dyslexic child has to
continually experiment with different reading comprehension strategies, as well as cope with poor reading skills on a daily basis, she/he will be less averse to taking risks and overcoming obstacles in general. At my high school, LD students were required to take Learning Strategies throughout their secondary school terms. When I opted out of the course in order to pursue more challenging academics, I recall my special education teacher telling me, “You don’t have the capabilities to survive in academic courses”. Even though I did survive – and thrived – I still self-criticize and self-reprimand to this day. For me, breaking through the stereotype of an incompetent LD student tastes bittersweet, because there was never any inherent value placed on achieving high marks whenever my mentors consistently set low expectations for me. The educator motivation was missing. My time in school has informed me of how words, coupled with expectations from those in positions of authoritative role models, can be an enduring weight on young students.

My narrative about my skewed experiences as a young learning disabled student can reveal insight into the reasons and motivations behind why some mildly LD pupils act the way they do and how they compartmentalize their views of themselves and others in a multitude of ways. In my story, I am just one individual among many. I wonder what stories teachers have within them and how mildly LD characters are represented in their stories. Are they all the same? Are they all different? Who are the victims? Who are the villains? And, who are the heroes? How are they embodied?
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

There is a wealth of literature examining a variety of factors that contribute to the perceptions and expectations elementary and middle school teachers have of LD students, including: The LD label (Clark, 1997; Shifrer, 2013;), the obviousness of a child’s disability (Cameron & Cook, 2013; Shuster, Hemmeter, & Ault, 2001) and the amount of teacher training (Ellins & Porter, 2005; Klehm, 2014; Woodrock and Vialle, 2011). At the same time, there are few studies that focus on how socio-cultural stories, in particular popular narratives in mass media influence the views of mainstream, non-learning disabled teachers of their mildly LD students (Perepa & Samsel, 2013). My study looks exclusively at teachers who do not have learning disabilities themselves. To support this decision, I draw from the findings of several research studies (Ferri, Gregg & Keefe, 2001; Goodfellow, 2014; Valle et al., 2004) that suggest mainstream teachers without their own LDs are less sensitive to and understanding of their special needs students. My paper intends to fill a void in the literature regarding the influence of cultural stories in mass media on the perceptions and expectations of teachers for their students with mild LDs. The types of stories investigated include, but are not limited to, TV, movies, books and other written and oral histories/editorial content. As the literature indicates, there is a need to investigate the perceptions and expectations teachers have of SLDs, specifically mild LDs, because many instructors misperceive the special needs and abilities (social and academic) of students with mild disabilities (Cameron & Cook, 2013; Klehm, 2014; Lavoie, 1994; Shifrer, 2013). As a side note, when I refer to students who have “mild LDs”, I am referring to students whom teachers perceive as needing little or occasional amounts of assistance (Cameron & Cook,
2.1 The General Embodiment of Disability

2.1.1 Crip Theory

My research study uses two theoretical frameworks: Crip theory and the theory of intertextuality. In the next paragraphs, I give an explanation of crip theory and how it informs my study. Intertextuality will be addressed later in this chapter.

In recent academic literature, several articles and books have been published that discuss multiple similarities between queer theory and disability studies, especially in terms of stigmatized embodiments of queerness and disability (Clare, 1999; Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006; Solomon, 2012; Valle et al., 2004). Renowned queer theorist and disability researcher Robert McRuer (2006) argues that the analyses of homosexual identity generated by queer studies should be infused with disability studies to form a new approach he calls “crip theory”. McRuer (2006) encourages a “queering [of] disability studies” as he highlights the shared minority status of queerness and disability (p. 19). He argues both queerness and disability are culturally constructed categories that mark some individuals as deviant in order to support the primacy of the normative order, namely heterosexual, able-bodied identity. “Since queerness and disability both have the potential to disrupt the performance of able-bodied heterosexuality,” McRuer (2006) argues, “both must be safely contained – embodied – in others” (p. 24). In his interpretation of post-structuralist Michel Foucault's (1977) historiography of oppressed groups, McRuer (2006) contends, “During the last two or three centuries, bodies have been monitored (by disciplinary institutions and by increasingly compulsory self-policing) for signs of
behavioural and physical difference that might impede their productivity; these signs of difference have been duly marked and, if possible, transformed, and improved” (p. 21).

One of my interview questions addresses this: How do fictional stories influence teacher expectations for the academic and social improvement of their mildly LD students? Even though some researchers (Shifrer, 2013) claim all LD-labelled students are afflicted from the outset with the low academic expectations of their instructors, other researchers (Cameron & Cook, 2013) argue that a majority of elementary school teachers are optimistic about the potential cognitive improvements of their mildly LD students. A number of educators believe students with mild LDs can be effectively managed and “perform as well as nondisabled students” with some additional instructor assistance (Cameron & Cook, 2013, p. 20). At the same time, according to the findings of Cameron and Cook (2013), mainstream teachers consistently frame LD students as unmotivated and in need of the same teacher guidance or general prompts (i.e. “try harder”) (p. 20). Crip theory points to the possibility that a teacher’s desire to improve the academic performance of mildly learning disabled students is motivated and informed by what McRuer (2006) calls "flexible ableism"; in other words, people with disabilities should be “improved” and “tolerated” solely because of “the recent historical emergence of disabled subjects unwilling to acquiesce to their own abjection” (p. 24). A seemingly inclusive and flexible teaching practice, such as having similar academic and social expectations for nondisabled students and mildly LD students, can be read as adhering to the modus operandi of dominant, able-bodied discourse – subordinating disabled individuals while also working with them (McRuer, 2006). Of course, elementary school teachers should aim to integrate mildly LD students into mainstream classrooms, but not at the expense of undermining a student’s individual identity and ignoring her/his special needs (academic and social). Cameron and Cook (2013) point out that the
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classroom needs of severely disabled students continue to be ignored by homeroom teachers, but so are the special needs of mildly disabled students, despite their supposed inclusion. As evidence from Shuster, Hemmeter, and Ault (2001) in their observational study of 12 students with low-incidence disabilities indicates, accommodations for mildly disabled students are largely dismissed in the modern-day classroom. In more than six hours of observation, teachers attended to only 45 per cent of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) objectives for their mildly to moderately disabled students, while the special needs of four pupils were forgotten or dismissed altogether (Shuster et al., 2001).

It is noteworthy that mild LDs are a unique form of disability often “hidden” and misconstrued by mainstream teachers as not a disability at all (Cameron & Cook, 2013). In their in-depth qualitative study of seven elementary school homeroom teachers, seasoned researchers Cameron and Cook (2013) summarize: “Teachers may be less concerned with setting goals in the area of social development for students with mild disabilities as the difficulties they experience are largely ‘hidden’, leading to the expectation that their social skills and related needs are essentially the same as nondisabled students” (p. 24). Using crip theory to investigate how teachers perceive mildly LD students in relation to their differences from ‘normal’ nondisabled students, my research study also explores the misperceptions and stereotypes generated by the similarities between mild LDs and nondisabled individuals. And, this continues to correlate with crip theory, which aims to expose and challenge standardized and orderly disability preconceptions. McRuer (2006) calls upon queer and/or disabled individuals to continue challenging “the demands of compulsory heterosexuality/able-bodiedness that we inhabit orderly, coherent (or managed) identities” (p. 5). He describes the methodology of crip theory: “[It] would resist delimiting the kinds of bodies and abilities that are acceptable or that will bring
about change. Ideally, crip theory might function like the term 'queer' itself...as a resistance to the norm” (McRuer, 2006, p. 31).

In modern North American culture, physical disabilities and intellectual differences are not considered desirable chosen qualities. In fact, McRuer (2006) notes that in Western society, intellectual differences and physical disabilities are not presented as choices at all. Rather, they are painted as atypical oppressions. In Jan Valle et al.’s (2004) qualitative study “The Disability Closet: Teachers with Learning Disabilities Evaluate the Risks and Benefits of ‘Coming Out’”, participants corroborate the notion that LD students have “no choice” (p. 7) in keeping their disabled identity a personal and private matter. The participants point to how LD students are automatically marked as different in the school setting when they are visibly withdrawn from regular class to access certain accommodations and perform psychological or linguistic testing (Valle et al., 2004). McRuer (2006) claims it is the visible “introduction of normalcy” into a social system (e.g. school) that “introduces compulsion” (p. 90). By defining learning disability as an opposite to what is normal, schools encourage LD individuals to think of themselves as societal misfits and eternal underdogs. More important, the socio-cultural stigma attached to the individual identity of disabled people has the potential to encourage all human beings, including teachers, to consciously or unconsciously develop myopic and negative views of LD individuals (Shifrer, 2013). Many research studies have concluded that mainstream teachers frequently neglect the special needs of students with LDs (Cameron & Cook, 2013; Shuster, Hemmeter, & Ault, 2001; Valle et al., 2004) and have below average expectations for their academic success (Klehm, 2014; Shifrer, 2013). As previously noted, Shifrer (2013) contends the mere label of “learning disability” marks a student as deviant. My study engages interviews and a questionnaire to investigate how teacher perceptions and expectations of mildly LD students are
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impacted by socio-cultural stories and old wives' tales that frame the juxtaposition of LD versus non-LD as normal versus abnormal or disabled versus nondisabled.

Contrary to its denotation, crip theory is not solely concerned with physically crippled individuals. Noted disability researcher Carrie Sandahl (2003) discusses the multiple applications of crip theory to various disabled people, and even nondisabled groups as she explains: “The term crip has expanded to include not only those with physical impairments but those with sensory or mental impairments as well. Though I have never heard a nondisabled person seriously claim to be crip (as heterosexuals have claimed to be queer), I would not be surprised by the practice. The fluidity of both terms makes it likely that their boundaries will dissolve” (p. 27). Seen in this light, crip theory is well-suited and positioned to aid both the formation and post-interview analysis of my interview questions, including: What kinds of stories influence teacher relationships with people who have learning disabilities? How do normative able-bodied narratives influence teacher perceptions of mildly LD students? Do you have to experience a personal connection to learning disabilities or the learning disabled in order to have an accurate or core understanding of students with LD? By using crip theory, I consciously position this research study as firmly resistant to and thoroughly critical of normative policies and myopic attitudes that prioritize one kind of body/ability, as well as the perception that the difficulties of mildly LD students are simple and predictable. I am also firmly resistant to and critical of normative, able-bodied discourses because of my own experiences as an LD-labelled student. Since the primary goal of this study is to better aid mainstream teachers in their daily relationships with their learning disabled students, crip theory provides a critical and nuanced approach to challenge conventional thought about LDs, or as McRuer (2006) expresses, “take a sledgehammer to...that which has been concretized” (p. 35).
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Overall, crip theory provides a critical or, in the lingo of McRuer’s (2006) crip theory, “severe” lens to interpret the interviewee accounts regarding LD embodiment. In response to an interviewee’s negative perception of mildly LD individuals, I rely on crip theory to generate useful reflexive queries, as well as follow up questions like: Does the individual have a negative view of people with mild LDs, because she/he compares them to normal able-bodiedness? Does the participant think mild LDs are a sign of abnormality? If so, why?

Following in the footsteps of respected queer and disability theorists like Judith Butler and Eli Clare, the ultimate goal of this qualitative study is to challenge what McRuer (2006) calls “a nondisabled liberalism/[neoliberalism] that can only imagine, tolerate, and indeed materialize people with disabilities as very special people, physically challenged, differently abled, or handicapped” (p. 41). I, too, agree with McRuer’s (2006) argument that “crip experiences and epistemologies should be central to our efforts to access alternative ways of being” (p. 42). In a similar line of thinking, my study explores the crip stories with which teachers come into contact, whether personal or cultural and how they influence comprehension of “alternative ways of being”, specifically in regard to mild learning disabilities.

2.1.2 The Disability Closet: Is it Hip to Come out Crip?

Inside or outside the classroom, how are learning disabilities discussed and presented in stories (both cultural and personal)? Do nondisabled teachers consider that their understanding of mildly LD students is limited by those students who resist or fear coming out of the proverbial ‘disability closet’? I pursue answers to questions like the former in my interviews and analyses.

In his explanation of the connection between globalization and disability, McRuer (2006) asserts that making people aware of both the diversity of and multiple discriminations against disabilities can, “positively rewrite and disfigure” one-dimensional social movements and static
stereotypes (p. 47). One of the purposes of my study is to determine teacher knowledge about the variety of mild LD embodiments. While sticking close to the goals of crip theory, I am motivated to look at the multiple meanings and interpretations that teachers ascribe to LD identity, because an “ideal” in qualitative studies, according to qualitative research expert, John Creswell (2013), is that “the findings will reflect differences or different perspectives” (p. 157).

As more people “come out crip”, McRuer (2006) believes the “proliferation” or plurality of crip identifications will erode one-sided and static views about disabled individuals. Many teachers and researchers would argue, however, that mildly LD students “coming out crip” in the school setting can have negative and downright dangerous results (e.g. bullying from peers and lower expectations from teachers), even when schools are designed to be safe environments for everyone (Cameron & Cook 2013; Goodfellow, 2014; Klehm, 2014; Shifrer, 2013). Some researchers also argue that teachers already know which of their students is learning disabled and, therefore, all SLDs are automatically pulled out of the ‘disability closet' (Shifrer, 2013). “Coming out crip”, however, involves more than simply making one's disability visible; it involves both independently voicing one's disability needs and resisting disability stereotypes. As discussed earlier, the social and academic difficulties associated with mildly LD students in the school setting are largely “hidden” and need to be independently voiced by LD students in order to be fully addressed (Cameron & Cook, 2013). The educational benefits of iterating one’s special needs can often be outweighed by negative social implications (Goodfellow, 2014; Shifrer 2013).

In her study of the inclusion of exceptional students in Ontario schools, Athena Goodfellow (2014) interviews a Grade 9 LD pupil named Mark, whose social well-being is compromised by both the visibility and self-admission of his LD identity. In the following
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excerpt from one of Goodfellow’s (2014) interviews, Mark discusses how he is viewed by others as both stupid and homosexual simply for being LD:

Mark: I told them [bullies] that it sucks for being made fun of for what you are.

Researcher: What did they say to you?

Mark: Retard, and now and then, they call people...me fag in elementary school (p. 71). 

Voicing one’s LD identity and special needs is clearly more complicated than a matter-of-fact pronouncement. There are harmful social consequences for the student who comes out of the proverbial disability closet (e.g. being alienated and/or bullied) (Valle et al., 2004). Inside and outside the elementary school setting, the LD label is seen as a pejorative term. Several research studies reveal how today's teachers continue to admit behind closed doors that mild LD students are “stupid” (Valle et al., 2004) and “disabled” (Shifrer, 2013), despite inclusive policies. It is curious that LD identity is framed in similarly negative ways in many TV shows. For instance, in 2010, reality series host Jeremy Clarkson suggested a car was unappealing by calling it "special needs" (Wilman, 2002). In a 2007 televised performance, stand-up comedian Daniel Tosh elaborated on "why retards are funny" (Tosh & Rodriguez, 2007). After Piers Morgan was fired as host of a primetime CNN talk show, he appeared on a radio program called The Alex Belfield In Conversation Podcast and he suggested to listeners he is superior to the American public, because they are, "special needs" (Belfield, 2014). How can teachers build a genuine rapport with their LD students, let alone understand the individuality of LD identity, when people with learning difficulties are shunned and scorned both inside and outside the school environment?

In Goodfellow’s (2014) study, LD students make the interesting claim that nondisabled mainstream teachers without intensive and hands-on working knowledge of learning disabilities cannot have sincere or core compassion for and understanding of LD individuals or their issues.
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Indeed, some recent research supports the contention that teachers who have more experiences with or personal connections to LDs have more positive perceptions of their learning disabled students (Klehm, 2014; Valle et al. 2004). Building on this research, my study purposefully interviews educators of varying professional experience levels interacting with LD individuals. Ideally, this clarifies or contributes to the literature on how the amount of experience with LD people affects the way teachers view LD identity.

McRuer (2006) argues it is beneficial overall for disabled individuals to “come out crip”, since the real lives of marginalized individuals often go unnoticed by the larger public. Images of crip identities are under- and misrepresented in social and cultural media; not only is it difficult to visibly discern some of the mild learning disabilities of individuals, but as McRuer (2006) explains, the struggles of marginalized communities must be “dematerialized in order for other [mainstream] experiences to be represented and broadcast as ‘reality’” (p. 64). In friction with the lives and problems of able-bodied individuals, both the embodiments and issues of disabled individuals “disappear” in popular media and social dialogues (McRuer, 2006). In beginning a discussion on gang-life in California, McRuer (2006) stresses that "gang studies, in general, [have] focused more often on death and prison; this section thus calls back the (disabled) disappeared” (p. 65). Taking a page from McRuer’s (2006) book, both mass media and disability studies have been predominately concerned with individuals who have moderate to severe disabilities (Bogdan, Elks & Knoll, 2012). My research paper attempts to draw out the hidden stories and myths of mildly learning disabled individuals – the stories that cannot be easily translated in the media, read in a person’s body language or heard in her/his voice. Hence, the title of my study plays off of the name of a children’s TV series about urban legends called Tales from the Crypt (Donner, 1989). Like the TV series, stories describing multiple embodiments of
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learning disabilities are clichéd and not fully represented in popular media. Rather, they are hidden (Bogdan, Elks, & Knoll, 2012).

2.1.3 The (Dis)abled Story

Crip theory is a critical component of my research, because it enables me to connect or bridge stories and myths about disabled individuals to stories about those who are nondisabled. McRuer (2006) emphasizes that disability eventually affects everyone, because if you live long enough, the odds you will experience some form of disability, either physical or mental are high. More important, crip identification is not just reserved for those who are currently disabled. According to McRuer (2006), the narrative of disability is the narrative of able-bodiedness, since they are always defined in relation to one another. Anyone who advocates the disfigurement or crippling of restrictive and monolithic labels for marginalized groups (McRuer, 2006) can also self-identify as a crip. For crip theorists like McRuer (2006) and Clare (1999), voicing or helping to voice the multiple forms of crip embodiment is beneficial to everyone, since it supports the “construction of new and more just…spaces” (p. 70). Able-bodied identity is inherently “disabled” in the same way that heterosexuality is inherently queer (McRuer, 2006). In the words of queer theorist Judith Butler (1999), “Heterosexuality offers normative...positions that are intrinsically impossible to embody, and the persistent failure to identify fully and without incoherence with these positions reveals heterosexuality itself not only as a compulsory law, but as an inevitable comedy” (p. 122). Eve Sedgwick (1983) also describes the "double-bind" of modern heterosexual life, whereby "intense male homosocial desire [is] at once the most compulsory and the most prohibited of social bonds" (p. 511). Sedgwick (1983) examines numerous examples of male homosocial bonds that underpin the socio-cultural structure and bureaucratic operations of Western societies, including male friendship, male mentorship,
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heterosexual competition and hazing rituals. In the same way that homosexuality is
interconnected with heterosexual lifestyles, so is disability intimately linked to the life of every
able-bodied individual. Due to a variety of factors (social, cultural, economic, environmental,
psychological and biological), no single person is physically or intellectually able to perform
every occupation or fulfill every task without error or solve every problem without making some
mistakes. Every "able-bodied" individual can therefore be considered as disabled to different
degrees. My study delves into the stories and myths teachers are familiar with for links between
LD and non-LD embodiments.

2.2 LD Embodiment inside the Classroom

2.2.1 Role of an Inclusive Mainstream Teacher

According to Canadian educational researcher Margret Winzer (2008), there is no
collectively shared definition of inclusive schooling among Canadian provinces, or even among
Western countries. My study borrows Winzer's (2008) broad definition of inclusion: "A system
of equity for students with exceptionalities that expresses a commitment to educate each child to
the maximum extent through placement, instruction, and support in the most heterogeneous and
appropriate environment" (p. 43). In an inclusive mainstream classroom, teachers strive to fulfill
several interrelated responsibilities, including the provision of equitable learning opportunities,
heterogeneous groupings, individualized treatment of students and teacher support. The evident
predicament of providing a classroom environment that is simultaneously safe for every student
and uniquely fitted to each individual's interests, needs and strengths is a daily reality for the
modern mainstream teacher in Western educational systems.
2.2.2 Governmental/Official School Perceptions of SLDs

The primary theme of my research study is how the perceptional development of three Ontario teachers towards LDs are imbued with the informal societal and mythical stories that have historically been passed down through one or more generations, sometimes skewed or changed along the way, but always with a seed of the original viewpoint. It is a mistake, however, to ignore the powerful influence of professional teaching policies and official medical guides concerning LDs. In their qualitative analysis of eight middle school teachers, Perepa and Samsel (2013) conclude that in regard to the participants’ conception of disability, “most…seem to base their understanding on a medical or deficit model of disability” (p. 140). According to Ontario’s Education Act, an exceptional student is defined as one “whose behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities are such that he or she is considered to need placement in a special education program” (ETFO, 2002, p. 3). The phrase “such that” is a formal, but long-winded way of saying that special education students are either above or below the average expectations of their grade level.

In Ontario, many of the professional obligations of educators to and academic expectations of LD students are outlined in the 2010 Ministry of Education document Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation & Reporting in Ontario Schools and the 2013 document Learning for All. In Growing Success, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2010) presents LD children as a conglomeration of formal information and informal stories, including expectations outlined in the student’s Individual Education Plan (IEP), psychological test results, teacher observations and informal narratives from parents and other teachers (p. 70-71). The Growing Success (2010) document underscores how a teacher’s positive attitude and professional skills are the key ingredients to help LD children feel safe. In the 2007 ETFO Special Education
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*Handbook*, there is a detailed education plan for specific learning disabilities, consisting of traditional indicators for different LDs and particular strategies for differentiating instruction, environment and assessment. Even though the handbook appears at first glance to be a comprehensive overview of SLDs, disability embodiments are fluid and constantly changing, according to crip theorist Robert McRuer, (2006). Teachers who rely solely on formal lists and medical definitions as common indicators of LDs will be less attuned to the multiple embodiments of learning disabilities. Like the *Growing Success* (2010) document, the ETFO (2007) guidebook highlights the importance of a teacher’s *varied* knowledge about LDs: “Classroom teachers and special education teachers require a vast array of skills and diverse knowledge in order to develop and deliver effective programs for students with special needs” (p. 7). Using my interview questions, I assess whether a teacher’s preconceived notion of LDs draws from government documents, traditional and social media, their own personal takeaways from social stories and myths or multiple texts.

### 2.2.3 Past Experiences of Teachers as Young Students

Several research studies discuss the connection between the amount of teacher training or past teaching experiences and current teacher perceptions and expectations of LD students (Ellins & Porter, 2005; Klehm, 2014; Woodrock & Vialle, 2011). Few researchers, however, have explored the actual adolescent stories of teachers, not to mention their favourite movies, TV programs and go-to literature at an early age. Huesmann, Eron, Moise-Titus, and Podolski (2003) analyzed the long-term side effects of children’s exposure to violent TV content. The researchers employed a longitudinal study of multiple participants between 6-10 years of age until they were in their early 20s. Based on their findings, Huesmann et al. (2003) contend that watching violent TV content at an early age is directly related to aggressive and violent behaviour later in life. The
media, therefore, has a powerful impact on the development of individual attitudes, and this impact in childhood can extend into adult life. In a different study, Valle et al. (2004) explore the factors relating to the decision-making processes of LD teachers to disclose their own disabilities to their students and immediate colleagues. One of the factors discussed as an influence in determining LD teacher perceptions of LDs in general is their “prior experiences” as students (Valle et al., 2004, p. 8). As LD teacher views of learning disabilities can be shaped by their past experiences as students, this study probes if the same holds true for non-LD teachers, specifically in relation to bygone and repurposed stories in the mass media. I ask interviewees: "When you were a student, do you remember seeing characters (in TV shows, movies, books or other published works) that were good role models for or representations of people with LDs? Do you think there is a difference in the way LD characters are portrayed in public media now as opposed to when you were an adolescent?"

### 2.2.4 Teacher Perceptions of SLDs

How do teachers view their LD students as individuals? What is the relationship between current inclusive classrooms and past segregated special schools? In the last few decades, the pedagogical narrative surrounding learning disabilities has both changed and yet, remained the same. In contrast to past educational practices, students who have different learning styles are no longer completely segregated from ‘normal’ functional students, but they are still negatively labelled as low-achievers (Shifrer, 2013). In Shah’s (2013) diachronic analysis of LD identity, she documents the English education system before the 1980s, in which there are “ample references to how the limited academic opportunities offered to students in special schools influenced the low expectations they had of themselves” (p. 74). By comparison, researcher Dara Shifrer’s (2013) analysis of LD identity in contemporary schools concludes that several teachers
still have “lower educational expectations for labelled adolescents” (p. 463). Cameron and Cook (2013) concur that many teachers set low academic expectations for LD students, but point out it is predominately directed at students who have severe learning disorders. According to the National Council for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) (2014), "seven out of 10 parents, educators and members of the general public incorrectly link learning disabilities with intellectual disability ("mental retardation")). Special education researcher Mary Klehm (2014) adds a further dimension to teacher perceptions of mild LDs by claiming these perceptions depend on the type of teacher. Referring to Klehm’s (2014) findings, special education instructors have more “positive attitudes” towards SLDs than general education instructors. In Goodfellow’s (2014) research study, the author does not distinguish between degrees of LD severity, but argues that LD students look at themselves as “different” and identify learning spaces as places of “loneliness” and “social isolation” (p. 72). There is a stigma that has its roots in LD myths and labels, and is internalized by mainstream teachers and appropriated by their students (Shifrer, 2013; Valle et al., 2004). Philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2004) describes a ubiquitous stigmatization of individuals who are considered to be "different". Although many research studies prioritize different factors that contribute to teacher perceptions of LD students, a majority of them support the stereotypical notion that homeroom teachers expect LD students to have predictable social and academic abilities.

2.2.5 Role of Inclusive Mainstream Teachers in Combating Disability Stereotypes

Educational researcher Sapon-Shevin (2015) claims that "inclusive education is not only an administrative arrangement but also an ideological and philosophical commitment to a vision of schools and societies that are diverse and non-exclusionary" (p.278). Likewise, Knoester and Yu (2015) argue that "teachers are committed to bringing about social change as active citizens
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within and outside of schools” (p. 190). Seen in this light, teachers cannot be true champions of inclusive education and social justice if they watch TV programs like *The Simpsons* (Groening, 1989) and *South Park* (Parker & Stone, 1997) that openly ridicule minority groups and perpetuate discriminatory stereotypes of disabled individuals. Mainstream teachers need to recognize the possibility that some students spend more time watching TV and surfing the internet than conversing with their parents and/or positive role models. It is important that teachers consider how individual views of LD are shaped by popular narratives that routinely categorize disabled individuals as abnormal and subordinate to their able-bodied counterparts. In the 21st century, teachers are responsible for supporting students with LD inside the classroom, as well as combating the proliferation of LD stereotypes outside the classroom. Knoester and Yu (2015) argue that teachers are "cultural workers" who should be sensitive to the power of media to influence the perceptions of students, staff, parents and themselves.

2.3 Multi-layered Stories: Intertextuality

McRuer (2006) states: “The birth of the crip comes at the expense of the death of the (individualized, able-bodied) author” (p. 52). In his essay “The Death of the Author”, post-structuralist icon Roland Barthes (1968) readily admits the individualized author is already dead, because all narratives are an irresolvable “tissue of quotations” (p. 313). This means that “in an utterance, several codes and voices are there, without priority” (Barthes, 1968, p. 335). In its intertextual and poly-vocal structure, personal narratives that evolve and continue to be re-shaped and refined over time can be interpreted as both protests against and conduits for societal mores and cultural norms. Noted post-structuralist Michel Foucault (1969) does not go as far as to say the author expires, but rather that he “disappears” and his traditional function as arbiter of his text shifts (p. 284). Foucault (1969) also describes how the majority of narratives and myths
in circulation in modern media are sanctioned and produced by publishing companies and other literary institutions (p. 287). Mainstream companies and institutions, Foucault (1969) argues, exclusively publish stories that stick to a specific unified structure and censorship of taboos (p. 287). Foucault (1969) says a storyteller’s singular voice and perspective are undermined and confounded by the very acts of mainstream publishing and broadcasting (p. 292). Both Barthes (1968) and Foucault (1969) insist an author’s intention is splattered and enveloped by the multitude of voices and normative codes that writing and storytelling generates – not to mention how many hands touch and change that voice to turn it into an expression that was not originally intended.

“Who is speaking?” proves to be a complicated question with complicated answers. Barthes (1968) and Foucault (1969) describe how writing is always anterior and unoriginal. My research study, by comparison, investigates how contemporary stories and myths about LD individuals (with which teachers are familiar) build on, resist or reflect earlier-generated negative perceptions of and limited expectations for LD students.

In much the same way, popular literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) asserts that words and the narratives they compose are “heteroglossic”. In short, they are bloated with a multitude of viewpoints and voices. According to Bakhtin (1981), the personas of characters in narratives at once fulfill and resist the conventional words of institutions, labels and other stories. Elaborating on Bakhtin’s (1981) and Foucault’s (1969) ideas, Jan Valle et al. (2004) explicate how teachers who perceive LD identity as fixed and predictable underestimate or fail to consider that “human beings function as active agents, who can choose to resist, challenge, or redefine themselves in multiple, shifting ways” (p. 6). By analyzing the intertextuality of teachers’ narrative accounts of LDs, I enrich my interpretations from spotlighting the complexity, mobility
and social construction of LD identity. My paper grabs onto the concept of “intertextuality” when analyzing interviewee responses to my questions. My post-interview analysis examines how perceptions and expectations of SLDs by participants either support or refute various texts (educational, social, cultural and personal). In particular, I pay attention to the words, symbols and metaphors – what Barthes calls lexical units – that frame teacher responses. My interview and questionnaire also explores this: How are the narratives of teachers about LD embodiment informed by different texts/scripts (e.g. movies, books, published news coverage and school documents) and codes (e.g. legal codes and social mores)? Do teachers believe that any media portrayals of LDs are truthful or helpful? In what ways do teachers look at LD embodiments as characteristically predictable or fixed?

2.4 LD Embodiment in Popular Media and Teachers’ Beliefs

According to McRuer (2006), negative and myopic portrayals of disabilities in media texts have both changed and remained the same over the last two centuries: “The homophobia and ableism represented in films and other cultural texts throughout the 20th century...have been superseded by new, improved and flexible homophobia and ableism” (p. 28). “In many [contemporary] cultural representations”, McRuer (2006) explains, “disabled, queer figures no longer embody absolute deviance but are still visually and narratively subordinated, and sometimes they are eliminated outright” (p.18). Fellow crip theorist Eli Clare (1999) laments, "We cannot turn on our television day or night and watch disabled people lead ordinary lives" (p. 124). Education researchers have analyzed a myriad of factors that influence teacher perceptions of students with disabilities, but Prithvi Perepa and Maria Samsel (2013) concisely note, it appears “the media has never been considered, as the lack of literature on the subject suggests” (p. 138). Research by Woolfson and Brady (2009) espouses that teacher perceptions about
disabilities can be influenced by sensational societal stories and stereotypes. Using a combination of oral interviews and written questionnaires conducted with eight elementary and middle school teachers, Perepa and Samsel (2013) uncovered that “some [participants] felt that the media tends to amplify the feelings of sympathy or pity towards a person with a disability” (p. 141). As the researchers assert, this finding alone suggests that teacher perceptions and expectations of LD students are influenced by the media, because it mirrors the findings of other research studies that unveil the superfluity of the pitiful perceptions teachers have of their students with LDs (Clark, 1997; Cook & Cameron, 2013; Shifrer, 2014). Sociologist David Phillips (1974) makes the compelling argument that mainstream news reports about crime, especially when it involves a celebrity, "gives other people...permission to engage in a deviant act, as well" (as cited by Gladwell, 2000, p. 223). Phillips explains that "suicide stories are a kind of natural advertisement for a particular response to your problems" (as cited by Gladwell, 2000, p. 223). LD media representations that imply all LD students are the same may also figure into a busy teacher's decisions.

The excessive pity many mainstream teachers have towards their LD students is not fully understood. Cook and Cameron (2013) profess that the narrative of the overly pitied disabled student is more applicable to a mildly disabled student than a severely disabled one. They contend that teacher perceptions of mildly disabled students as “essentially the same as nondisabled students” encourages and maintains a strong concern for their academic well-being (Cook & Cameron, 2013, p. 24). The logic is that the less disabled the student, the more eager a teacher will be to provide academic assistance and motivation, since the mildly disabled student is seen as more pliable and self-sufficient than her/his severely disabled counterparts (Cameron & Cook, 2013). With reference to a mildly disabled student, a teacher’s compassion and efforts...
in the classroom are more likely to lead to noticeable academic improvement (Cameron & Cook, 2013). As mentioned earlier by McRuer (2006), the desire to “improve” disabled individuals can be seen as confirming, rather than resisting ableist norms.

Indeed, Cameron and Cook (2013) also point to the potential risk of neglecting the special needs of mildly disabled pupils, especially if teachers expect mildly disabled pupils to have the same social skills and other abilities as ‘normal’ pupils. By comparison, Shifrer (2013) does not differentiate between severe, moderate or mild LDs when asserting the strong correlation between LD identity and excessive teacher pity. One researcher contests and argues the opposite is true: Most mainstream teachers have a lack of compassion towards all SLDs (Goodfellow, 2014). My research project attempts to clarify the somewhat murky relationship between teacher pity, media portrayals of learning disabilities and the individual needs of students with mild LDs. I show participants a short compilation of various film and TV show clips that depict LD people as both pitiful creatures and laughable freaks. I then ask participants: How do these video-clips or other media representations of LD individuals compare to your actual experiences with mildly LD students?

In many answers to their interview questions, Perepa and Samsel (2013) find that the participants “feel that their teaching practice is not influenced by what they view on television and in films” (p. 143). By contrast, their questionnaire responses indicate “the vast majority acknowledged that their understanding of disabilities was [influenced by what they view on TV/film]” (my emphasis) (Perepa & Samsel, 2013, p. 143). Perepa and Samsel (2013) infer the contradiction between teacher perceptions of media influence and their professional beliefs and practices is reflective of the different methods used to collect data (i.e. interviews and questionnaires). Due to the impersonal nature of questionnaires, the researchers suppose “people
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may feel that they will not be judged and hence be more honest. Another possibility is the teachers feel that agreeing media influences their attitudes in an interview would or could be perceived as a sign of weak character” (Perepa & Samsel, 2013, p. 143). I prioritize this valuable research insight when I ask interviewees my questions about how popularized societal stories and images that address learning disabilities influence their specific perception of LD embodiments inside the classroom.

Building on the foundational findings of Perepa and Samsel (2013), I use my interviews while investigating the effects of media influence on classroom expectations to ask open-ended questions – and use questionnaires to re-address specific and potentially sensitive details about interview questions. For instance, the interview participants are asked: Do stories in the media influence your understanding of learning disabilities? By contrast, my questionnaire more specifically asks: Do popularized stories about LD individuals influence your perceptions and expectations of your students with mild LDs? Following up on the results of Perepa and Samsel (2013), I probe deeper into the powerful and potentially positive influence of popular media about LDs on teacher perceptions and expectations. A large portion of the teachers in the Perepa and Samsel (2013) study agree there is a range of educational benefits associated with watching documentaries about LDs, including general knowledge about the home environment, process of diagnosis and understanding personal daily difficulties of SLDs (Perepa & Samsel, 2013, p. 142). It does merit noting, however, some prominent disability scholars like Charles Riley (2005) caution that confessional literature "has proved to be flawed as the genre is shaped by market expectations" (p. xix).

Although I am guided by Perepa and Samsel’s (2013) research in my understanding of the relationship between media and teacher perceptions, I also intend to extend the scope of their
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study. Perepa and Samsel (2013) define media in terms of only movies and TV (visual platform); I go further to look at the influence of literature (text platform) on teacher perceptions of LD students. To their credit, Perepa and Samsel (2013) base their conclusions on quantitative statistics generated by Ofcom (2005) that reveal of all media platforms, movies and TV are the greatest contributors to socio-cultural perceptions of disabilities. At the same time, it is important to consider the influential words of media studies guru Marshall McLuhan (1967): "All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered" (p. 26). By comparison, modern storyteller Toni Morrison (1992) opines, "cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation’s literature" (p.39). Some research studies have indeed concluded that books have a powerful effect on how teachers who themselves are labelled LD perceive their own identities. After reading Patricia Polacco’s 1998 children’s book, Thank you Mr. Falker (about a young girl with dyslexia – Polacco herself – who struggles to read in school), a special education teacher who self-identifies as dyslexic became more “vocal about” and more “proud of” her own disability (Valle et al., 2004, p. 11). My research study extends the idea that books can influence the perceptions of LD teachers towards mainstream non-LD teachers.

When I refer to popular mass media, I am referring to the universe of mainstream information sources available to us today, including movies, TV, newspapers, magazines, books, radio, public service documents, advertising, internet and social media platforms.
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2.5 Summary

My hope is that by exploring the perceptions of LDs through the eyes and life experiences of teachers, as well as a variety of third-party stories, new light will be shed on why the needs of mildly LD students are misperceived, despite the incorporation of inclusive policies. At the same time – and in line with the aims of most qualitative research studies – the findings of my study do not intend to be generalized (Creswell, 2013). I hope to illuminate the specific beliefs of three homeroom teachers with unique and varied backgrounds. Both my interview questions and my post-interview analysis use crip theory as defined by notable queer and disability researcher Robert McRuer. I also look to the ideas surrounding the theory of intertextuality as presented by leading post-structuralists Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Mikhail Bakhtin. My research study also delves into how the perceptions and expectations of mainstream elementary school teachers for their mildly LD students are influenced by different kinds of stories or media texts (personal, societal, cultural, collegial, institutional and regulatory). Alongside crip theory, the theory of intertextuality is used to support the notion that individual perceptions and stories in the media are infused with societal codes and norms, even if educators are reluctant to openly admit it.
3.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I describe the narrative methodology that formed the framework and thrust of my study. I start by reviewing the general approach, procedures and data collection instruments prior to describing criteria for participant sampling and recruitment. I explain data analysis procedures and review ethical considerations germane to my study. This is coupled with a critical analysis of the limitations and the strengths of the narrative methodology. I conclude the chapter with an overview of my methodological choices and my rationale for these choices in light of the research purpose and questions.

3.1 Research Approaches and Procedures

This is a qualitative research project that involved a semi-structured interview with elementary school teachers and is supported by a review of the literature surrounding qualitative research, narrative methodology, crip theory, the theory of intertextuality, disability studies, media studies and teacher perceptions and expectations of students with learning disabilities (SLDs).

3.1.1 Qualitative Research

The literature review was conducted prior to the primary data collection (semi-structured interviews). The purpose of the literature review was to investigate if qualitative research methods, specifically narrative inquiry, offer insight into media-generated teacher perceptions and expectations in Western society. Given the volume of vivid images and stories about SLDs in popular media, my decision to investigate the life stories of teachers was a logical one,
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because narrative methodology offers systematic procedures for organizing and synthesizing multiple categories and themes found during data collection (Creswell, 2013). Moreover, the purpose of my study – to uncover multiple conflicting narratives about LDs – aligned with one of the primary goals of qualitative research, to both analyze and report "multiple realities" (Creswell, 2013, p.19). Like other qualitative researchers, I consciously articulated my own biases and background in my study to my participants, and I further "positioned" myself as part of a value-rich system that, among other things, prioritizes able bodies and minds over disabled (Creswell, 2013, p.19). In qualitative studies, researchers are encouraged to reveal and deconstruct the biases of both themselves and others. As discussed in Chapter 1, I was an LD student who experienced firsthand the so-called “inclusive” practices of mainstream teachers, whereby negative expectations and stereotypes of SLDs continue unabated. Qualitative research allows marginalized people like me to have a voice and potentially transform the perceptions and expectations of other researchers, teachers and the general public.

3.1.2 Narrative Methodology

Narrative methodology – defined by Creswell (2013) as "analyzing stories told" (p.70) – offered an effective means for answering both my primary research question and my sub-questions. My research study employed a specific kind of narrative method – what Plummer (1983) calls an "oral history" – involving the collection and analysis of anecdotes from one or more participants. Creswell (2013) discusses how oral history research studies are typically guided by interpretive frameworks and, accordingly, I implemented crip theory and the theory of intertextuality in my study. My procedures for organizing data followed in the footsteps of other narrative studies that mold participant stories into a chronology of past, present and future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). While analyzing the oral histories of teachers, I compared their
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stories and characterizations of SLDs (at a particular time and place) to popular Western narratives about SLDs present during the same and later time periods.

3.1.3 Literature Review

In tandem with my theoretical frameworks (crip theory and the theory of intertextuality), I used results from educational research studies to inform the content during the semi-structured interviews and questionnaires and to support the post-data analysis. Relevant sources cited during the literature review process included academic journal articles and books, as well as government documents and both publicly- and privately-owned mainstream broadcast, print and online media outlets. The majority of the materials used were qualitative research studies centred on teacher perceptions and expectations, LD identity and media sway. At the same time, I turned to some literature that focused on quantitative statistics, as well as the work of well-known theorists who have had a significant impact on disability studies, media studies, the theory of intertextuality and crip theory in Western society.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The primary instrument for data collection used in this study was the semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews are an ideal form of data collection with regard to both my research topic and my methodology, because they provide the opportunity to elicit and discuss participant stories (Creswell, 2013). As the researcher, I chose this style of interview, because I believed it would create a level playing field to ask each interviewee the same questions, while leaving room to ask individual follow-up questions, as well as to prompt and re-word questions that ensured a clear understanding of and a connection to my research topic. I conducted one interview with each of the three Ontario-based teachers. I also instructed participants to fill in a
questionnaire at the end of the interview. In many of the answers to their interview questions, qualitative researchers Perepa and Samsel (2013) uncovered that participants “feel that their teaching practice is not influenced by what they view on television and in films” (p. 143). By contrast, their questionnaire responses indicated that “the vast majority [of the participants] acknowledged that their understanding of disabilities was influenced by what they view on TV/film” (my emphasis) (Perepa & Samsel, 2013, p. 143). Perepa and Samsel (2013) argue that the contradiction between teacher perceptions of media influence and their actual professional beliefs and practices is reflective of the different instruments used to collect data (i.e. interviews and questionnaires). By supplementing my interview questions with a questionnaire, I intended to capitalize on and advance the insights of Samsel and Perepa.

The question lists for both the interview and the questionnaire were developed prior to the start of the interviews and were approved by my research supervisor. The questions are attached as Appendix A and Appendix B. The primary area the inquiry was designed to address was the relationship between teacher perceptions and expectations of mildly LD students and LD representations in the mass media. The questions also focused on the categories and themes germane to my two theoretical frameworks and literature review. This served to guide interviewee responses to what I believed would be relevant to teacher views of SLDs, including negative stereotypes, positive representations, teacher pity and normal versus abnormal categorizations. At the end of my interview sessions, I executed video elicitation (i.e. showing participants photos and videos) as both a platform for discussion and a direct illustration of how mainstream media portrays people with learning disabilities (Creswell, 2013). I showed participants a short compilation of film and television show segments that depicted LD people as either pitiful souls or funny freaks. I then asked participants this open-ended question: How do
these video-clips or other media representations of LD individuals compare to your actual experience(s) with mildly LD students?

3.3 Participants

In this section, I review the sampling criteria I constructed for participant recruitment, and I analyze alternative pathways for teacher recruitment. I also include a section in which I introduce each of the participants.

3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

The criteria I applied to my three teacher participants included:

- They must be a former or current Ontario, Canada elementary public school teacher
- They must be non-LD
- They must have experience as a homeroom mainstream teacher
- In comparison to other participants, they must have different levels of experience working with SLDs

Since my own elementary school experiences were based in the province of Ontario, Canada and my literature review analyzed educational documents authored by the Elementary Teacher's Federation of Ontario (Special Education Handbook, Fulfilling the Promise), participants in my study had to be former or current elementary public school teachers in Ontario, Canada. Building on Goodfellow's (2014) research that suggests non-LD, mainstream teachers without intensive and hands-on working knowledge of learning disabilities cannot have sincere compassion for and understanding of LD individuals or their issues, my study purposefully interviewed non-LD educators of varying teaching experience working with mildly LD students. Ideally, this clarified or contributed to the literature on how the amount of exposure to LD people affects the way
teachers view LD identity. My participants needed to have experience as mainstream homeroom teachers (not special education teachers), because my study would critically analyze the inclusion of mildly LD students in mainstream classrooms. As discussed in Chapter 2, there is a need to investigate the perceptions, attitudes and expectations of mainstream teachers in light of recent literature indicating that SLDs feel excluded from the classroom community despite inclusive teaching practices (Goodfellow, 2014; Nusbaum, 2013). The attitudes of mainstream teachers towards SLDs have been on the radar of several other research studies, but few have looked at the impact of media representations we repeatedly see and hear every day and everywhere.

### 3.3.2 Sampling procedures

Given the small-scale nature of this study (just three participants) and the tight time constraints, I recruited participants using a combination of convenience and purposeful sampling. Simply put, my participants were chosen based on their availability and how accessible they were to me, along with their ability to shed light on the research problem (Creswell, 2013). Convenience sampling is an appealing approach because it reduces the amount of time, money and effort expended during the research process, but, as many qualitative researchers argue, it can also reduce a study's credibility (Creswell, 2013). As a current teacher candidate and graduate student, I am always in contact with an array of elementary educators. As such, I relied on my current contacts and networking connections to help me find suitable participants for my study. Since the possibility of recruitment was not equal for all individuals, study results are not generalizable to all teachers. This is in line with many qualitative research papers that seek to understand or describe a central phenomenon for specific participants at a particular time and place (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Although Creswell (2013) cites several narrative studies that
successfully use convenience sampling, there are other sampling procedures appropriate for a
narrative inquiry such as my study. To reduce researcher bias and enhance the credibility of my
study, I could have also used maximum variation sampling, by which participants are selected
from a diverse group of individuals who align with the researcher's sampling criteria (Creswell,
2013). I could have adopted this sampling method to document variations in teacher perceptions
and ensure participants and sites were completely different from each other (Creswell, 2013).
Furthermore, maximum variation sampling would have solidified the qualitative nature of my
study, since it would have increased the probability that my results would reflect conflicting
perspectives – an ultimate goal in all qualitative research papers (Creswell, 2013). In addition to
convenience sampling, I also engaged the following strategies to discover and recruit
participants: attending professional development meetings/teacher education programs and
capitalizing on innovative relationships (also known as opportunistic sampling), informing
teacher colleagues of my research topic and sampling criteria and then determining if they could
identify suitable candidates (snowball/chain sampling).

3.3.3 Participant Bios

The interviewees were all teachers from Greater Toronto Area (GTA) schools. As
previously stated, I purposely interviewed non-LD educators of varying teaching experience with
mildly LD students. I hoped this would clarify or contribute to the literature on how the amount
of exposure to LD people affects the way teachers view LD identity.

Sarah was the least experienced teacher I interviewed. She was a 27 year-old
primary/junior teacher and had been instructing for four years, including three years in charge of
her own homeroom class. She had three years of experience teaching students with learning
disabilities. The grades she had taught were 3/4, 4/5 Gifted and 4 Gifted. At the time of my
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interview with Sarah, she was teaching Grade 4 Gifted.

In relation to the other participants, 36 year-old Marcus had a moderate amount of teaching experience. He was qualified to instruct primary, junior and intermediate grades. He had been teaching for eight years, seven of them as a homeroom teacher. Throughout his teaching career, students with LD have been present in his classes. The grades he taught included K, 2, 3, 6, 7 and 8. Marcus's position at the time of my interview with him was Grade 8 homeroom instructor.

Lucy was the most seasoned teacher to participate in my study. At 36 years-old, she had amassed 14 years of professional experience teaching students with learning disabilities, including 12 years as a mainstream homeroom teacher. She had taught Grades 2-6, including a Social Adjustment Class for Grades 1-4. At the time of our interview, Lucy was teaching Grade 6.

3.4 Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and the scripts were analyzed in detail by locating reoccurring themes threaded throughout the interviews. The literature review, especially the writings on crip theory and the theory of intertextuality, were used to note themes, position stories in a chronology and “re-story” participant accounts. The ideas outlined by crip theory and the theory of intertextuality were set forth to provide a "causal link" among participant stories, themes and thoughts (Creswell, 2013, p.74). I followed the procedural guide of post-modern narrative writer, Czarniawska (2004) as I deconstructed stories and looked for categorizes, patterns, themes, contradictions, polarities, gaps and silences. Both the literature review and my theoretical frameworks informed the questions I asked the participants. Most questions, therefore, were aimed at specific themes and informed by certain theories (i.e. crip theory and
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the theory of intertextuality). These themes included LD stereotypes, positive LD representations and the power of the media.

The scripts were first analyzed and highlighted for reference to the themes and dichotomies mentioned in the literature. The emerging themes from participant stories were then put in chronological order based on when they occurred in each participant's life (i.e. a day ago, a year ago, a decade ago or a few decades ago). The way a theme changed or remained the same throughout a teacher’s life was thoroughly probed. Next, the interviews were analyzed again to highlight any common denominators that did not fit into either the literature-derived themes or the theoretical frameworks. The transcripts were reviewed a third time to look for specific answers to the research questions. Finally, participants were emailed a copy of my paper and were given a deadline of two weeks to look over the research and validate that my interpretations were not exaggerated, misconstrued or taken out of context. Member-checking was also conducted, because, according to qualitative researcher veteran John Creswell (2013), a key component to narrative methodology is that interviewer and interviewee "negotiate the meaning of the stories" (p.75). By allowing participants to see my interpretations of their respective oral histories, I directly expressed to them my genuine sincerity and desire for their input and the accurate representation of their words.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

All of the participants were advised of the interview process, specifically that the interviews would be taped, transcribed and then reviewed by the interviewees through a procedure called member-checking (Creswell, 2013). Before teachers could participate in the study, they had to agree to the process and sign an agreement (Appendix C) to take part in the study with the acknowledgement that their names and the school names would remain
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confidential. In this agreement, potential participants were informed of the research topic, the ethical implications and specific expectations of involvement (one 60-minute interview and one questionnaire), as well as the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time up until the research project was complete. There were minimal risks associated with participation in this study. Given the research topic and interpretive framework, it was possible a particular question could inadvertently spark a negative response from a participant that could cast her/him in a bad light, thereby making her/him either reluctant to openly respond and/or feel uncomfortable. I minimized this risk by re-assuring participants throughout the interview and in the consent letter that they had the right to refrain from answering any question with which they were not comfortable. I also re-stated their right to withdraw from participation at any time. Participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts and to clarify or retract any statements before I conducted data analysis. All data (audio recordings) were stored on my password-protected iPod and will be destroyed before 2017.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

This project had two major limitations. First, my data was restricted to interviews and questionnaires. As suggested by a number of narrative researchers (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2013; Czarniawska, 2004), in order to conduct an effective narratology, it is necessary to gather a wide range of information about a participant's life, including a variety of personal documents (e.g. photographs, memos of official correspondence, family member accounts and personal/family/social artifacts). At the same time, the collection of adequate personal information is never guaranteed or considered complete in a qualitative narrative study (Butler, 2005). The inability to extract a person's complete lived experience or life story is as much a methodological weakness as it is a methodological strength. To recognize a participant's words
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are never wholly representative of her/his reality or life experiences is a sophisticated application of ethics, specifically the concept of respect. Prominent narratologist Judith Butler (2005) suggests that a complete disclosure of an individual's lived experience is not only impossible, but nonessential and undesirable. Butler (2005) contends, "narrative coherence may foreclose an ethical resource – namely, an acceptance of the limits of knowability in oneself and others" (p.63). Second, my participant selection was not sensitive to potential racial and ethnic factors that might contribute to hidden or overt biases toward SLDs. For instance, in the qualitative study conducted by Valle et al. (2004), a participant of Latin-American descent made a sweeping statement that all Latino parents are susceptible to discrediting an LD diagnosis of their children, because learning disabilities are historically frowned upon in traditional Latin-American culture. These kinds of ethnic and racial biases are not factors in my research study.

My research project has a unique strength. Since I conducted both an interview and a questionnaire with all three teachers, I was able to gather more details from them than I would with a survey or interview alone. A semi-structured interview creates time and space for teachers to address what matters most to them when it comes to the research topic. Semi-structured interviews are therefore not simply a passive or apathetic exchange of words; rather, they have the power to substantiate teacher experiences and offer a valuable opportunity for them to interpret their life experiences and reflect on their perceptions, expectations and practices.

**3.7 Conclusion: Brief Overview and Preview of What Comes Next**

In this Chapter, I discussed the general structure of my narrative methodology, its strengths and limitations, ethical considerations, participant recruitment, data collection instruments and analysis and sampling strategies. Throughout this Chapter I described why the oral histories of participants are an effective conduit to investigating the relationship between
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mass media portrayals of SLDs and teacher stories about SLDs. The oral histories of teachers have long been the basis of educational research, but rarely in relation to media editorializing. Perhaps it is symptomatic of the pervasive influence of mass media that researchers have not dedicated substantial time to investigating its perceptual consequences on teachers – as if researchers and teachers are somehow above or outside the gravitational pull of mass media. By contrast, media scholar Marshall McLuhan (1969) emphasizes that media images and stories should not to be dismissed as trivial phenomena; the mass media contributes greatly to every individual's lived experiences. It composes a kind of socio-cultural soup that every person – including highly educated teachers – swims through, gorges on and is engrossed in. In Chapter 4, I report my research findings.
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.0 Introductory Overview

This chapter outlines the overall findings from the data collected during one interview and one questionnaire with each of my three participants. The interviews were carried out in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) with three homeroom elementary school teachers of varying degrees of experience teaching students with LD (SLDs) in a mainstream classroom setting. Sarah was a teacher with three years of experience instructing SLDs at junior and intermediate levels. Marcus taught grades at junior, primary and intermediate levels, and had eight years of experience teaching SLDs. Lucy had the most experience teaching SLDs in junior and intermediate grades with 14 years under her belt. (All teacher names are pseudonyms). For more information on participant backgrounds, refer to the section titled "Participant Bios" in Chapter 3.

Both the literature review and my theoretical frameworks intentionally informed the questions I asked the participants. In order to understand the media’s influence on the views and perspectives of my participants, I structured my questions to first acknowledge their personal experience and current views on disability in general, working my way up to the subject of LDs and the representation of LDs in media. My data analysis below reflects this chronological construction. Most questions were aimed at specific themes and informed by certain theories (i.e. crip theory and the theory of intertextuality). I grouped similar themes together in order to illustrate their close connection, as well as to present my information in a holistic and organized manner. My thematic groups included:

- Teacher Understanding of Disabilities and Expectations of Students with Disabilities
- Teacher Perceptions of LD Representations in the Media
4.1 Teacher Understanding of Disabilities and Expectations of Students with Disabilities

4.1.1 Understanding of (Dis)ability

All three participants shared a similar understanding of disability. To 36 year-old Marcus, a disability means, "You can always achieve a goal, just not the same way or at the same time [as everyone else]" (Interview, September 22, 2015). He further explained, "We all have a disability, because we're not all perfect" (Interview, September 22, 2015). The two other participants also defined disability as a socially constructed concept that both separates and unifies people – something that conflicts with a person's ability to perform a task in the same way as a typical person and yet, everyone can be considered to have a disability. As Lucy posed, "You have your strengths and weaknesses and you compensate for them by doing what you're good at" (Interview, October 7, 2015). The descriptions of disability offered by my participants directly contrasted a deficit-based medical definition, and would be endorsed by crip theorists, because they unsettle the binary between the able-bodied and the disabled. Able-bodied teachers who are willing to align themselves with those who struggle to learn certain topics or perform certain tasks strongly oppose stigmatizations against the disabled community (McRuer, 2006). Philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2004) argues that because human beings fear vulnerability and weakness, "an appearance of control is...frequently purchased by the creation of stigmatized bodies" (p. 337). My participants admitted that every individual's existence is precarious to different degrees. They all clearly understood and appreciated the important notion that disability is not the same thing as inability and no able-body is "perfect" (Interview, September 22, 2015).
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Disability scholar Andrew Solomon (2012) chimes in, "We are all differently abled from one another, and context – which is socially constructed – often decides what will be protected and indulged" (p. 33). One of my participants noted that stigma against students with disabilities is relative and dependent on the unique environment of each community and school. Another participant referenced one of her former male LD students who was fully included and accepted by peers in her classroom, yet experienced bullying and segregation in another Ontario school. Results from other research studies centred on students' perceptions of LD (Bunch & Valeo, 2004) corroborate this. Overall, disability did not translate as inability for my participants.

4.1.2 Understanding of Students with LD – Conjuring One-Dimensional Views

Reflecting the participants' understanding of disability, an LD student was commonly described as someone who learns differently than the rest of the class, but paradoxically, everybody in the class can also be considered LD. Why? This is because every student has different strengths and weaknesses that change over time and across different environments. The views of learning disabilities from my participants demonstrated respect for individual differences and acknowledged attributes shared by all human beings, regardless of ability. But, it is worth noting the troublesome familiarity bias brought forth by participant Marcus: "When most people are asked to define a child with a learning disability, they think of a child with an extreme learning disability as opposed to a child who has a mild learning disability" (Interview, September 22, 2015). The fact the term “LD” automatically conjures one-dimensional and extreme views in our minds illustrates the susceptibility of LD individuals to be pigeonholed into a monolithic label. Of concern is that most people are inclined to assume an LD diagnosis to be on the severe side. According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) (2014), "seven out of 10 parents, educators and members of the general public incorrectly link learning
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disabilities with intellectual disability ('mental retardation')" (p.11). Temptation to exaggerate the embodiment and severity of an LD diagnosis is widespread in North American society as revealed in recent studies in Canada (Goodfellow, 2014) and the United States (Shifrer, 2013). Curiously, Lucy opined, "Kids with major disabilities are represented [in] [the] [media] more than kids with mild learning disabilities” (Interview, October 7, 2015). It might be that people tend to associate LD identification with a severe disability, because the media predominately showcases severe instances of disability. In response to interview questions about LDs, participants frequently lapsed into discussions about other exceptionalities, including more severe disabilities like Asperger syndrome, autism and mild intellectual disabilities. Despite being confident they have created a safe, valued and respected environment for all their students, my participants weighted high the power of socio-cultural prejudices to supersede school practices. In Lucy’s words, "I use conversation to discuss differences, but we're in a nice little sheltered area here [at school] and when students leave here, it’s a whole other ball game” (Interview, October 7, 2015). If teachers are deeply invested in the welfare of their students, they need to view societal prejudices and biases as serious threats to both their professional practice and student self-perceptions (Noguera, 2003).

4.1.3 Understanding of Students with Mild LD – "...the kids who fall between the cracks..."

In the Ontario educational system, LDs are not presented on a formal spectrum. Participant Sarah simplified it, "You either have an LD or you don't” (Interview, October 1, 2015). I intentionally referred to different degrees of LD in my study in order to illustrate the variety of embodiments that fall under the designation of LD. It is also worth noting the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO) (2015) uses the categories of mild, moderate and
severe in relation to LD. My participants concurred that LDs do exist on a spectrum, a finding that is in conflict with the Ontario educational system, which does not present LDs on a formal spectrum. My participants referred to students with mild LD as those who require "minimal accommodations" (Interview, September 22, 2015), "extra time to complete tasks" (Interview, October 1, 2015) and "[less] support from teachers or outside resources than students with severe LD" (Interview, October 7, 2015). Despite high academic expectations for her students with mild LDs (As and Bs), Lucy described a lack of customized assistance to those same students, because of "bigger cases" (i.e. more severely disabled students) that require extensive teacher attention (Interview, October 7, 2015). She asserted elementary school students with mild LDs do not get the personalized assistance they need, calling them "smart kids who can grasp this, but who fall between the cracks" (Interview, October 7, 2015). In Lucy's case, the "smart" qualities of students with mild LDs restrict them from the individualized assistance they need. Simply put, certain embodiments of LD identity (i.e. severely LD students) are more likely to receive teacher aid than others. Mildly LD students are perceived as less in need of assistance, because they are more likely to complete their work independently. Curiously, the needs of students with mild LDs fall off Lucy's radar, because she pinpointed mildly LD students as too smart or too normal. This is an important finding, because it negates research by Cameron and Cook (2013) that argues teacher perceptions of mildly disabled students as “essentially the same as nondisabled students” encourages and maintains a strong concern for their academic well-being (p. 24). An LD student's ability to handle independent work does not mean he or she is free from other formidable obstacles that, without teacher assistance (including minor prompts and signs of encouragement), can hamper motivation and damage self-efficacy (Klassen & Lynch, 2007; Shuster, Hemmeter, & Ault, 2001). Providing help to special needs students, especially the
accommodations documented on IEPs, should not be overlooked or ignored by mainstream teachers (Shuster, Hemmeter, & Ault, 2001).

4.1.4 Perceptions of SLDs as Pitiably

Cook and Cameron (2013) contend the narrative of the overly pitied disabled student is more applicable to a mildly disabled student than a severely disabled one. The theme of sympathizing with mildly LD students was not consistent in the interview responses of my participants. Marcus claimed mildly LD students are "just like any other student" and, therefore, require the same teacher encouragement as any other student (Interview, September 22, 2015). Sarah commented on her dedication to the academic success of mildly LD students, because of their unique and nuanced learning styles and not because of a similarity to non-LD students as Cameron and Cook contend (2013). "I don't want to say they take up a lot of my time," Sarah added, "but they do require a lot more of my attention, because I'm constantly thinking of strategies, accommodations and modifications to help them get through the academic year" (Interview, September 22, 2015). In contrast to her colleagues, Lucy pictured mildly LD students as both "the kids you know are so smart and you know can grasp this" and "the students who get overlooked, because there are so many bigger cases" (Interview, October 7, 2015). The logic that the less disabled the student, the more eager a teacher will be to provide academic assistance and motivation is not consistent with my data findings. Marcus, by comparing his mildly LD students to their nondisabled classmates, risked trivializing their special needs and homogenizing their unique identities. Each participant iterated sympathy for their mildly LD students, but only one participant (Sarah) admitted to dedicating additional personal time and effort to assist her mildly LD students. Crip theorists offer a caveat to this desire to "improve" disabled people: "Disabled people...may be angered by the prospect of interventions that would make them function more
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like nondisabled people" (Solomon, 2012, p. 38). Even though a student associated with the LD label is prone to stigmatization and negative stereotyping by teachers and peers (Goodfellow, 2014; Shifrer, 2013), this does not mean all LD students loathe or are ashamed of their disability. Sarah even noted how a former student with a mild writing disability was unusually vocal about and proud of his LD. After learning about the reading difficulties of the fictional character Percy Jackson, Sarah described how that very same pupil made an announcement to the entire Grade 4 class: "Oh yeah, I have an LD. That is so me [referring to Percy]! Sometimes, when I'm reading or writing, the letters are just going all over the place" (Interview, October 1, 2015). Teachers need to be sensitive to the possibility that some LD students embrace their disability. The urge to improve SLDs should always be critically analyzed to filter out any intentions of assimilation, normalization and/or the stripping of LD identity.

4.1.5 Academic and Social Expectations of Students with Mild LD

For their students, the academic expectations of my participants were uniform: Mildly LD students are expected to perform tasks at grade level with some accommodations, such as extra time on activities, access to a computer for writing and one-on-one assistance during independent work. Social expectations, by comparison, were different for each participant. After four years of professional teaching experience, Sarah had not encountered a single LD student with "social impediments" (Interview, October 1, 2015). This explains why she has the same social expectations for her LD students as her non-identified mainstream students. In conjunction with literature on the subject, participant expectations of their students were conditioned or informed by their previous teaching and learning experiences (Ferri, Gregg & Keefe, 2001; Valle et al., 2004). Sarah wondered if her lack of exposure to LD students with "social impediments" is
a quirk of the Gifted Program she is currently teaching or "something else" (Interview, October 1, 2015). Marcus also pondered why social expectations for LD students should be different from the rest of his class. Even when he did notice that some mildly LD students "feel like they can get away without participating," he said he encouraged them to participate, "in the same way I encourage the rest of my class” (Interview, September 22, 2015). Both Sarah and Marcus agreed they have had experiences and interactions with sociable LD students that have left a mark on their social expectations of LD students in general. At the same time, they were both quick to remark that every LD student they meet is a unique and new individual, who they take time to understand as both a person and a student. In line with the content of Ontario Ministry of Education documents (e.g. Learning for All), participants frequently referenced the term "equity" to explain their approach to classroom inclusion. According to Learning for All, equity "does not mean treating people the same without regard for individual differences" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 64).

Lucy was the most nuanced and apt in her description of her social expectations for mildly LD students. "I have the same social expectations to an extent. It's a hard question, because learning disabilities can be social” (Interview, October 7, 2015). She also shared that an LD diagnosis can "exacerbate any social issues that are already there” (Interview, October 7, 2015). Marcus said he “tried” to provide accommodations for SLDs while "not necessarily making a big deal about it,” (Interview, September 22, 2015), but it was Lucy who believed the spotlight is usually on students with learning disabilities, especially students with moderate to severe LDs that are continually withdrawn from class. Veteran special education teacher Richard Lavoie (1994) explains further when he says many LD students are "socially imperceptive" and exhibit underdeveloped interpersonal skills, including the tendencies to "interact awkwardly and
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inappropriately in social situations" (p. 2). The inclination of some participants to hold the same social expectations for both non-LD and LD students may be motivated or re-enforced by their prior experiences with SLDs, including interactions with sociable SLDs in their previous classes and/or witnessing media representations of classrooms that illustrate a uniform picture of student academic ability and social skill. A more in-depth analysis of media influence is given later in the Chapter.

4.1.6 Experience Versus Understanding – "I have the experience so I can't erase it"

All my participants agreed the *experience* of being a teacher brings with it the power to transform one's understanding of SLDs. Marcus commented, "I think being a teacher and being exposed to a variety of different students, attending different professional development sessions and just talking to special education resource teachers builds my understanding of students with LDs" (Interview, September 22, 2015). Both Marcus and Sarah confessed they took stereotypes about people with LDs at "face value" before becoming teachers (Interview, October 1, 2015). The more years of teaching and the more types of classes taught further enhanced participant understanding of SLDs. Lucy's understanding of SLDs is built on 14 years as a teacher, including two classes dedicated to students with special needs: a Social Adjustment Class (Grades 1-4) and a Self-Contained Classroom (SCC). Even though she has been teaching mainstream classes for the past few years, Lucy confided during the interview: "I'm speaking from a special education teacher perspective, because that's what I am. I have the experience, so I can't erase it” (Interview, October 7, 2015). It merits mention that Sarah had the least amount of teaching experience, but more opportunities to listen to life stories from friends and colleagues who have LD, which gave her a rich understanding of their individual learning challenges and psychological struggles. A depth of teaching experience increases one's understanding of the
academic and social performances of SLDs, but an equal – if not more powerful – learning tool is listening to and reading the narratives of real-life LD people, as supported by the results of other studies (Perepa & Samsel, 2013; Valle et al., 2004).

4.1.7 Individuality of LD Students

Lucy's comprehension of SLDs was shaped by a respect for the individuality of every type of LD and every person who has an LD. The other participants also acknowledged and pledged respect for the unique personality of every student, exceptional or not. A common theme in participant interview responses was the admission that each student encountered is a unique person who cannot be judged in advance. Lucy, however, was the only participant to critically analyze her understanding of SLDs in terms of feeling what it is like to have an LD and to be an LD student. "I can't be empathetic. I'm just not in that position,” she emphasized (Interview, October 7, 2015). "I can be sympathetic, but I don't understand something that I haven't experienced. I think I might have more understanding, because I have an understanding personality and I have experience teaching students with LD, but compared to someone who experiences life and learning as an LD student, I don't have that experience" (Interview, October 7, 2015). Lucy continued her analysis by saying she had no learning issues growing up, "so I can't understand how a person with LD is feeling" (Interview, October 1, 2015). The sentiment of I-have-sympathy-but-no-empathy is in line with Athena Goodfellow's (2014) study on LD embodiment, in which LD students argued that teachers who are not LD cannot wholly grasp the day-to-day struggles of a SLD. The important admission that one's knowledge about SLDs is never complete offers a way for non-LD teachers to demonstrate genuine respect for the individuality of LD identity. The ability to confess one’s limitations in understanding LD students may be a product of teaching experience. Sarah, with the least amount of teaching
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experience, was the only participant who chose the word "complete" to describe her understanding of her SLDs at the end of the school year. Teachers should not be swayed into thinking they know everything about their students (i.e. they know the full story of a student's life to date). The notion of absolute understanding can breed an illusory and potentially detrimental sense of mastery and control over others. "Narrative coherence," argues esteemed feminist Judith Butler (2005), "may foreclose an ethical resource – namely, an acceptance of the limits of knowability in oneself and others" (p. 63).

4.1.8 Transformation of Understanding of Students with LD since Childhood

Participant experiences with SLDs during childhood were much the same, and their perceptions were also similar on how things have changed for SLDs in Ontario's modern educational system over the years. All the participants agreed there has been a change in the way they personally think about SLDs that has evolved over time. According to my participants, an LD diagnosis at a Greater Toronto Area (GTA) school 15-20 years ago would assign a student the label(s) of dumb, unpopular, dangerous and/or weird. All my participants "hoped", as Sarah did, that their "[school] experience is very different from what the current experiences are for students" (Interview, October 1, 2015).

One participant response spoke fittingly to the general opinion of the others: "Then, the special needs kids were pulled out and it wasn't talked about positively. Now, the kids are integrated in the mainstream classroom and we talk about how everyone learns differently" (Interview, October 7, 2015). Treatment of SLDs in the present education system has changed, but stigmatization remains. As a young student, Lucy remembered her elementary school days as a time when all SLDs were openly withdrawn from class and "they only played with each other” (Interview, October 7, 2015). Marcus noted how this social segregation unfortunately continues
today in his Ontario classroom: "[SLDs] often want to be in the same group, because I think they are comfortable with each other. Or, it could be an insecurity issue, too” (Interview, September 22, 2015). He added, “They may be afraid that by joining another group, they might be teased” (Interview, September 22, 2015). As a high school student, Marcus recalled the stigma against LD students was so strong, non-LD students avoided talking to them. "If you spoke to someone with an LD, you were seen as a loser, or people would question why you would want to hang out with that ‘dumb’ person” (Interview, September 22, 2015). Like her colleagues, Sarah believed there is less stigma against SLDs today than in previous decades, but "not enough, yet” (Interview, October 1, 2015).

4.2 Teacher Perceptions of LD Representations in the Media

Educators are tireless in their efforts to heighten reflexivity and illuminate what Kidder and Born (1998-99) call “the hidden curriculum” (how students map/mold the words and expectations of teachers into certain values or attitudes) (p.41). The "hidden curriculum” is not exclusive to the classroom, nor does it solely influence young students. In contemporary society, every individual is constantly inundated with daily sensationalized media accounts that are often and unknowingly internalized (McLuhan & Fiore, 1969). It is important researchers and teachers give weight to how individual views of LDs are shaped by popular narratives that routinely categorize disabled individuals as abnormal and subordinate to their able-bodied counterparts.

4.2.1 Lack of Representation

When it comes to teacher perceptions of LD media representations, there was overwhelmingly agreement with McRuer's (2006) assertion that disabled characters in mass media are "visually and narratively subordinated, and sometimes they are eliminated outright”
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(p.18). In the interview process, my participants struggled to recall any examples of LD characters in media and often complained, "there aren't enough representations" (Interview, September 22, 2015) or "it's not something I see on a regular basis" (Interview, October 1, 2015) and "I can't think of one good example” (Interview, October 7, 2015). Two participants touched on the common knowledge that few celebrities openly discuss having an LD. "We need more celebrities to be open about their LD identity,” Marcus urged (Interview, September 22, 2015). Sarah pointed to a wide range of books that address differences, but noted less than a handful of movies and TV programs that include or discuss LD identity as part of their story/editorial content. Lucy suggested the stigmatization of LD might inhibit a person's motivation to reveal her/his LD identification to millions of people. The literature on LD stigma (Shifrer, 2013) and the risks of "coming out crip" (Valle et al., 2004) support her conclusion. Lucy singled out CNN reporter Anderson Cooper for his reluctance to make his LD (dyslexia) more transparent to his audience. "It's one thing to say you're a spokesperson for Weight Watchers, like Jennifer Hudson," she explained (Interview, October 7, 2015). "You've overcome bad eating habits, but it's another thing to say I'm Anderson Cooper and I have an LD. His credibility is out the window if he says that – and he knows that” (Interview, October 7, 2015). The lack of diverse LD representation in media can be read as a sign of the insignificance, low value and shame that Western media ascribes to LD identity. Lucy said it best: "You have your one kid on a TV show who is your behavioural or LD kid and you have one kid who can't learn in a school where there are 35 kids in one classroom. Life is really not like that" (Interview, October 7, 2015).
4.2.2 Exaggerated and Stereotyped LD Media Representations – "TV makes the problem worse than it is"

Each participant described how the media typically presents LD characters as dumb, dangerous and above all, extraordinarily different. Whether it is the incompetent and impulsive student Ralph Wiggum from *The Simpsons* (Groening, 1989) or the poor decision maker Joey from *Friends* (Crane, 1994), participants consistently noted the trend to paint LD media representations with a monochrome and satirical brush. This is an issue, according to all who participated in my study. Although people with LDs are capable of acting silly, no single trait defines the actions and attitudes of every person with or without LD. Lucy opined, "Sometimes, kids with LD are the kids who are silly or who bully, because they're compensating for something. I don't like when the only view that LD kids (who probably watch TV at home) have of people who are like them are people who can't succeed" (Interview, October 7, 2015). A prevailing theme in participant responses was that media representations of LD people are often fragmentary, spotlighting the silly or the pitiful characteristics of an LD character above all other attributes. Lucy cringed at media portrayals of LD people and people with LD characteristics, like Ralph Wiggum from *The Simpsons*, who she lamented, "makes the problem worse than it is" (Interview, October 7, 2015). Of interest to this study is that Lucy framed Ralph's learning difficulties as a "problem" and expressed that she was bothered by how Ralph's actions are "not normal" (Interview, October 7, 2015). According to crip theory, advocates for disabled individuals and crip culture should oppose the exaggeration, subordination and normalization of disability (McRuer, 2006).

Sarah, like Lucy, deplored most movie and TV show representations of LDs and found they are "reduced to stupid humour and [they] just pick and choose general characteristics of LD
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to represent an LD person” (Interview, October 1, 2015). Further, she said it was “not representative of the reality in which you see students who are diverse and have the LD designation” (Interview, October 1, 2015). Sarah, Marcus and Lucy expressed serious concerns about the presence of exaggerated LD media representations. Marcus worried that media representations could impact an LD student's self-perception. He offered up the possibility that students with LDs will see negative media representations of people with learning difficulties and "they will think that's not me, I don't have a learning disability, because I don’t act like that” (Interview, September 22, 2015).

4.2.3 Ableist Media in Schools

Some unrealistic media representations of LDs are targeted directly at young children, as noted by my participants. Sarah, in particular, disclosed the discovery of a troubling ableist undercurrent in the popular children's book series, Diary of a Wimpy Kid (Kinney, 2007). She targeted the friendship dynamic between the main character and his less-than-rational friend Rowley as lopsided since "the main character has all the great ideas and his friend is portrayed as the stupid sidekick” (Interview, October 1, 2015). This participant believed the mistakes and missteps of the "sidekick” are meant only to create humour. In this way, the media is complicit in encouraging young students to think it is acceptable to laugh at people who struggle to learn in a conventional way. Sarah did not encourage her students to read the book series. The presentation of Rowley as an inferior slow learner in A Diary of a Wimpy Kid exemplifies McRuer's (2006) description of flexible ableism – the simultaneous toleration and subordination of people with physical and mental differences. The journey to achieve happiness and success for the main character is presented as disproportionately more important and valuable than the narrative of his slow-witted sidekick, whose struggles and mistakes serve to elevate the gag humour factor.
Some teachers and researchers might question my link between LD individuals and fictional characters not clearly identified as LD. There have been many simpleton sidekicks throughout the history of media – Mickey Mouse's counterpart Goofy and Archie’s simpleton comic book pal Jughead are perhaps the most well-known – whose idiosyncratic ideas and off-beat actions can be attributed to either a quirky personality or an LD diagnosis. To be clear, ableist LD media representations can take the form of any character that, regardless of eccentric behaviour and/or a formal LD identification, is relegated to a subordinate position in relation to other characters, simply because they gather, process or convey information in an unconventional way (LDAO, 2015). Dichotomizing disabled identity and able-bodied personality should be avoided, since it reinforces a medical, normative mindset that seeks to segregate, cure and assimilate people with disabilities (McRuer, 2006). It is noteworthy that Sarah commended A Diary of a Wimpy Kid for having other "good lessons in it," as if this redeemed its ableist undertones (Interview, October 1, 2015). It is tempting to excuse or ignore ableist ideology when it is sandwiched between images of goodwill and moral lessons. But, it is unacceptable that ableist messages subtly propounded in children’s books are largely unchallenged, unanalyzed and unquestioned in contemporary schools that buy and, therefore, endorse media like A Diary of a Wimpy Kid.

4.2.4 The Purpose and Influence of Silly Characters with LD Traits

All my participants took a critical stance when encountering LD stereotypes in the media. They questioned the intentions of TV and movie screenwriters and book authors. One example of critical viewing stood out from the rest. Sarah is an avid TV viewer of the series Friends (Crane, 1994) and since becoming a teacher, she has noticed a disturbing trend in her favourite show. Even though the character of Joey is not identified as someone with an LD, Sarah noted,
"He is always portrayed as someone who is not as bright as the others" (Interview, October 1, 2015). She referred to one salient clip in which Joey wants to buy a set of encyclopaedias to gain the same knowledge as his friends, but he can only afford to buy the V-volume. Sarah mimicked the salesman holding the encyclopaedias, taunting Joey to buy the V-volume: "How do you feel that your friends know all of this and you don't?" (Interview, October 1, 2015). Shortly after buying the encyclopaedia, Joey memorizes all the words beginning with the letter V and then converses with his friends using primarily V-words. Sarah did not look at this satirical representation of people with learning difficulties as superficial entertainment. She questioned: "What were they trying to say about Joey? Is it that he's not as smart as his friends? He has other strong suits, like being an actor and he speaks up. So what are they trying to say about him academically?" (Interview, October 1, 2015). Along with the satirical overtones about his gullibility and lack of knowledge, Joey's limited vocabulary, slow processing speed and peculiar method of acquiring information (i.e. memorization from an encyclopaedia) are held up as synonymous with weakness, stupidity and farcical comedy. His gullibility is clearly ridiculed, and more subtly, his excellent memory and strong work ethic (which the writers of the show gloss over and build up as foolish behaviour). The localization and concentration of cognitive difference in one character, followed by the ridicule of that character can be read as a sign of an ableist agenda – the segregation of disabled identity from able-bodied identity, and the disavowal of an able-bodied audience’s personal connection to disability enacted to assuage the fear of being vulnerable and weak.

The idea that myopic media representations of SLDs can serve to strengthen the binary between disabled individuals and able-bodied individuals is an idea from crip theory shared by my participants and worth analyzing in more depth. During the interview, participants watched a
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clip from *The Simpsons* (Groening, 1989) in which Bart is placed in a Grade 4 special education classroom that is learning how to write the cursive letter A, while the mainstream Grade 4 class is parsing verbs and adjectives from sentences written in cursive. As mentioned by my participants, the special education students are depicted as slow-speaking, clumsy, irrational and above all, comical. Bart criticizes the snail’s pace of the class and asks the teacher how she expects her students to catch up to the mainstream class when she is teaching at a much slower pace. Lucy acknowledged that Bart offers a "really interesting point," because special education programs are supposed to close the achievement gap and in some circumstances they ultimately fail to do this” (Interview, October 7, 2015). The suggestion that all special education classrooms progress at a very slow pace is plainly inaccurate, Lucy argued. The writers and producers of *The Simpsons* may be fully aware they are generalizing the conditions of a special education classroom, but Lucy insisted "that's what people think, they're like, 'Oh, its Room 9. My room isn't Room 11, it's Mrs. West's (pseudonym) class, but the special education classes are in 'Room 9'" (Interview, October 7, 2015). Lucy used the “Room 9 vs. Mrs. West's room” example to illustrate the special education classroom (Room 9) is not perceived as on the same level or even remotely akin to a mainstream classroom (Mrs. West's room). Referring to a class by its room number suggests that the class is not only wholly different, it is not a place of real learning and its occupants lack typical human qualities – hence the reluctance of people to associate the room with a teacher's name. Regarding the counterproductive teacher and dumbed-up misfits in *The Simpsons*, former special education teacher Lucy confidently claimed, "In a special education class, that's what non-LD kids think of you or what LD kids think of themselves. They act very silly. I see this often” (Interview, October 7, 2015). Sarah agreed: "Mainstream kids might be thinking those students in the special educational room just sit there and write their ABCs and
they're even slower than us” (Interview, October 1, 2015). Fictional media representations are recognized as powerful contributors to LD student self-perceptions, as well as the public’s perceptions of students with LDs and the special education classrooms they may use.

### 4.2.5 Helpful Representations

One participant declared that "any representation of LDs in the media is a good representation," because kids with LDs are not represented in proportion to the volume we actually have in a classroom (Interview, October 7, 2015). When I first began my study, I too was challenged to identify any popular LD media representations, let alone if they were positive or negative. To my surprise, some of my participants shared a rich inventory of inspiring LD role models, including characters that are well known (Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, Kung Fu Panda) and less known (Ally from *Fish in a Tree* [Hunt, 2015], Onia from *Degrassi* [Stohn, 2001], Theo from *The Cosby Show* [Werner, 1984]). Urging for more holistic portrayals of LD characters that take into account their humanity and unique personalities, a common theme ran throughout participant interviews: the call for more non-fiction representations of LD people in popular media. Consistent with literature on the topic (Perepa & Samsel, 2013; Valle et al., 2004), the three teachers referenced interactions with LD people (students, friends and colleagues), as well as individuals who have a close connection to SLDs (parents and SERTs) as vital contributors to their understanding of LD identity. It merits noting, however, prominent disability scholars like Charles Riley (2005) caution that confessional literature "has proved to be flawed, as the genre is shaped by market expectations" (p. xiv).

### 4.2.6 Using Media in Teaching about Exceptional Students

All the participants loudly pronounced (in both interview and questionnaire format) that
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mass media does not affect their perceptions and expectations of SLDs, but they did readily admit to using positive media representations of LDs as a teachable moment or a pedagogical tool. Every year, Marcus reads *Thank you Mr. Falker* (Polacco, 1998) to his Grade 8 class. Sarah analyzes scenes from the movie *Kung Fu Panda* (Cobb & Osborne, 2008) with her Grade 4/5 Gifted class and they discuss how the Panda’s struggle to learn kung fu parallels how people learn in different ways. Lucy, despite a wealth of experience teaching SLDs, does not use media in the classroom to discuss LD identity, because she said she is unable to readily find positive examples of SLDs in literature, movies or TV shows. That my most experienced and understanding participant was reluctant to expose her classroom to media with LD representations – or to use these representations as a teachable moment – suggests the educational benefits of LD media representations may be overlooked, discarded and/or poorly understood. Effective teaching depends on building from what students already know, including the media content they consume. If teachers dismiss the resource of popular media to help teach LDs, or don’t have the savvy to locate media portrayals of LD people or students with learning difficulties, they miss out of capitalizing on a vibrant area of student background knowledge (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 5). Most students have read, seen or heard about the characters Harry Potter or Kung Fu Panda – and they provide a familiar platform to grow student comprehension of those who learn in different ways.

### 4.2.7 Internalized Myths

The participating teachers discussed two prominent myths about LDs that impinged on their own worldview at least once in their lives, specifically that people with LDs are comically silly and/or pitifully stupid. Marcus described the common LD character as "someone who does something stupid and you have to forgive him or her, because they have an LD” (Interview,
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September 22, 2015). SLDs as silly and/or stupid are myths featured in popular media, and all my participants vocalized their concern that students and parents might unknowingly incorporate LD stereotypes into their understanding of LD identity. If students witness negative media representations of students with LDs, like the comical depiction of a special education classroom in *The Simpsons* (Groening, 1989), Sarah worried "this is what a student’s perception of a special education room will always be" (Interview, October 1, 2015). Interestingly, participants also held Sarah’s general sentiment that LD myths did not influence them. Even so, after Sarah watched a clip I chose from *The Simpsons* in order to illustrate an LD stereotype, she exclaimed, "I can't believe I forgot about this! It's played a big part in my life and it has become very much internalized" (Interview, October 1, 2015). When I suggested to Lucy that perhaps ableist representations are so pervasive in Western society that they blend into the background, she acquiesced that it is difficult to say whether one is affected by them or not. Crip theorist Eli Clare (1999) analyzes the ridicule of disabled people in 19th century freak shows and argues that discrimination against disabled groups in modern media is everywhere. It abides by the dominant heterosexual, able-bodied order of Western society which seeks to externalize, segregate, subordinate and contain otherness. "We cannot," Clare (1999) laments, "turn on our television day or night and watch disabled people lead ordinary lives" (p. 124). According to recent research (Perepa and Samsel, 2013), as well as my participant responses, images of disabled people in the media have not significantly moved the dial in the 17 years since Clare (1999) wrote *Exile and Pride*.

### 4.2.8 Changes in Media Representations over Time – "Not enough"

Participants collectively believed there is more of a discussion and representation of LDs in mainstream media compared to when they were students, but there is still not enough
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representation. Sarah pointed to the recent popularity of movies with storylines about people with advanced intellectual abilities (e.g. *A Beautiful Mind* [Grazer & Howard, 2001] and *The Imitation Game* [Grossman & Tyldum, 2014]), but she struggled to name movie and TV show examples that tell the whole life story of someone with a mild LD. Lucy suggested contemporary media representations of LDs are blatantly misleading. She explained, "In 2010, we knew there were more students who had LDs than got pregnant and yet, we see more kids on the 10th season of *Degrassi* getting pregnant and doing drugs than LD kids. You see more transgender kids on *Degrassi* now, too. Perhaps, LD students don’t make for good TV" (Interview, October 7, 2015).

Despite the increased presence of books like *Thank you Mr. Falker* (Polacco, 1998) and *Fish in a Tree* (Hunt, 2015), published literature that give individual insights into the unique lifestyles and diverse identities of people with LD, Marcus discussed how screen content like *South Park* (Parker & Stone, 1997) and *The Simpsons* (Groening, 1989) tries to make LD people interesting to naive audiences by exaggerating disabilities for a cheap laugh. Teachers need to be acutely aware of the omnipresent ableist ideas and stories that permeate society and constantly threaten to impinge on school environments and influence individual perceptions (Sapon-Shevin, 2015).

In summary, my participants believed media representations of people with LD have increased over time, but one-dimensional and satirical views of LD people still prevail in a significant way in media portrayals. This is likely because mild LD identity, in all its various forms, does not provide the kind of entertaining dramatic backdrop the public expects or wants to see in their entertainment selections. Or, as crip theorists add, the lack of realistic portrayals of LD people is a way to subordinate LD identity, strengthen the binary between able-bodies and disabled bodies and illustrate the low value that society attributes to those with learning difficulties. Consolidating the views of participants and crip theorists, author Daniel Keyes's
(1966) classic novel *Flowers for Algernon* about intellectually disabled character Charly ponders the unique profile of ableism that pervades modern society and contemporary media representations. Charly reflects: "How strange it is that people of honest feelings and sensibility, who would not take advantage of a man born without arms or legs or eyes – how such people think nothing of abusing a man born with [seemingly] low intelligence" (Keyes, 1966, p. 138-139). Instead of it being taboo to ridicule all forms of disability, modern society deems it appropriate to satirize mild cognitive impairments. Western society cannot claim it accepts all disabled people, when discrimination against certain types of disabilities are tolerated or overlooked.

### 4.3 Media Influence on Teacher's Perceptions

#### 4.3.1 Media Influence on Teacher Perception of Students with LD

As previously stated, my participants did not acknowledge a direct connection between their professional practice and media reflections of LD characters. While they admitted particular characteristics of some fictional characters resemble their students, they fiercely contested the idea that media impacts their relationship with their mildly LD students. Media might not directly affect teacher perceptions and expectations of students, but it does impact the role of a 21st century educator of special needs students (Sapon-Shevin, 2015). Several educational researchers debate that modern teachers are "cultural workers" who should safeguard the rights of minority groups both inside and outside the classroom (Knoester & Yu, 2015; Sapon-Shevin, 2015). By viewing, reading or listening to sensational media, individuals are exposed to more than stereotypical images – they are unintentionally complicit in the perpetuation of those
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stereotypes, giving their emotion, attention, time and support (circulation) to discriminatory messages or images.

While analyzing interview transcripts, I detected a consistent pattern and contradiction as participants frequently denounced the stereotypical nature of entertainment media, yet they continued to watch it and were even drawn to it. Lucy is "obsessed" (Interview, October 7, 2015) with the TV series Degrassi (Stohn, 2001) and Sarah is hooked on Game of Thrones (Benioff, 2011). During his interview responses, Marcus often criticized humorous LD stereotypes and associated them with entertainment media, but he confessed to watching comedy-dramas like The Ringer (Blaustein, 2005), in which characters with LDs are used as gag humour.

Entertainment media targets naive audiences who don’t know any better, Marcus commented. But, he did reveal at the start of the interview that his pastime is watching World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) (Seitz, 2015), one that involves a menagerie of stereotypes, including LD exaggerations (e.g. the special needs wrestler named Eugene). This is not to mark my participant as a supporter of discrimination, but to demonstrate the power and complexity of media influence – that an intelligent and experienced teacher like Marcus can make the choice to watch and enjoy sensational shows, even though he denounces their purpose and societal impact. Marcus justified the existence of movies like The Ringer (Blaustein, 2005) in their primary intention to be humorous entertainment that does not represent reality. What is fictional entertainment to a teacher, however, can be taken as non-fiction education by a student and/or a parent. A person's distinction between fictional entertainment and factual information is relative – something that is dependent on their education, experience and critical thinking from one moment to the next. As "cultural workers", teachers should promote the well-being of all students by actively opposing exclusionary and discriminatory practices both inside and outside
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the classroom. Marcus is not ignorant of the cultural role of teachers. He stressed, "I have an understanding of people with an LD, and I guess that's part of our job. As teachers, we take that knowledge and we teach it forward, whether it's to our students, our family members or our friends" (Interview, September 22, 2015). Marcus recognized his job as an educator extends beyond the school's physical boundaries, but being a “cultural worker” and an advocate for LD students involves spreading and safeguarding accurate knowledge about LD identity. In short, LD media stereotypes can be detrimental to the perception of LD students inside and outside the classroom, even if they are for entertainment purposes. Minority groups clearly recognize the damage of derogatory media representations as suggested by recent boycotts against racist, sexist and homophobic movies. Transgender activists boycotted the 2016 movie Zoolander 2 (Cornfield & Stiller, 2016), due to its negative depiction of a transgender individual (Elgot, 2015). In their role as "cultural workers", teachers can help deter the popularity of LD stereotypes by deconstructing and rejecting media that uphold ableist agendas. Making the conscious choice to watch the ridicule of LD people or LD characteristics sends the message that certain ableist behaviour is permissible. Although discriminatory media portrayals can serve an educational purpose (there is more on this later in the Chapter), the disturbing fact is that many people genuinely want to laugh at people they consider to be "dumb".

4.3.2 Media Influence on Self-Perception as a Teacher of Students with LD

I was surprised to learn the self-perceptions of the participants as teachers were influenced by the media they watched, even though they claimed that media representations played no part in their perceptions of students with LD. Teachers readily acknowledged fictional and non-fictional teachers of special education students with whom they either identified, aspired to be like or wished to be unlike. Some of the teachers they idolized shared some of the same
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characteristics. They were patient with LD students, supported their needs, used differentiated instruction and promoted a growth mindset that is based on the idea that hard work and perseverance can improve individual abilities in any subject area and in any of their students. Marcus divulged that he watches the movie *School of Life* (Dear & Milliken, 1995) before the start of every school year, because he identifies with Mr. D (the teacher played by Ryan Reynolds), who supports a variety of differently-abled learners, including a student who is teased because of a stutter. By comparison, Sarah watched films like *Freedom Writers* (Devito & LaGravenese, 2007), because "I'm shown examples of good teachers who need to know their students as individuals first and find out what their interests and needs are before they can move forward" (Interview, October 1, 2015). In her explanation of the film's effect on her worldview, Sarah directly contradicted her claim that media representations do not impact her perceptions and expectations of LD students. She believed that *Freedom Writers* offers a window into the socio-economic conditions and family dynamics of struggling students, and it is applicable to "what our students go through on a daily basis" (Interview, October 1, 2015). She argued the movie has the power to remind teachers "to put the context of the student into perspective, whether or not they have special needs" (Interview, October 1, 2015). Sarah and Marcus strive to be like the teacher-characters they admire and replicate their positive attitude towards LD students. Seen in this light, certain media representations can actually sharpen teacher's pedagogy and enhance their ability to build rapport with students of all abilities. Of course, the actions of teachers in mainstream media is not a panacea for understanding and managing students, but my participants vouched for the inspiration of fictional teachers to assist and help shape their classroom mindset in relation to students with and without LDs.
4.3.3 Media Influence on Teacher Pity for Mild SLDs

Despite denying a direct connection between mass media and professional perceptions and expectations, it is curious that some of the LD representations discussed by Lucy offered a world in which the social struggles and academic needs of students with mild LDs can be overlooked by teachers and these students can still achieve success. This is not to say that media representations are the sole contributors to Lucy's perceptions and expectations of mildly LD students, but that media representations may be a factor in promoting certain classroom actions (i.e. ignoring the special needs of mildly LD students). Lucy described how the academic and social pessimism of LD character Joey Jeremiah in her favourite TV series Degrassi (Stohn, 2001) resolves itself without any intervention. After Joey is diagnosed with an LD, he becomes depressed. Luckily, he meets his girlfriend Caitlyn in the special education class and he also keeps his friendships with non-LD students Wheels and Snake. Even though Lucy recognized that mildly LD students are "smart kids" (Interview, October 7, 2015) whose needs are often overlooked because of the demands of students with even greater disabilities (a belief that is supported by study results from Shuster, Hemmeter, and Ault, 2001), it is telling that the media she watches endorses the possibility that mildly LD students can work out problems on their own without the help of authority intervention.

Sociologist David Phillips (1974) makes the compelling argument that mainstream news reports about people, especially celebrities who commit crimes, "give other people...permission to engage in a deviant act, as well" (as cited by Gladwell, 2000, p. 223). He explains that "suicide stories are a kind of natural advertisement for a particular response to your problems" (as cited by Gladwell, 2000, p. 223). LD representations that infer mildly LD students can cope with social issues and be academically successful without teacher assistance may likewise feed into a
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busy teacher's decision to ignore the needs of students with mild LDs in favour of students with more severe disabilities. "Human decisions," Phillips (1974) explains, "are subtle and complicated and not very well understood" (as cited in Gladwell, 2000, p. 223). The power of media to skew or permit our innate behaviour should be further researched as it applies to student understanding of LDs and the lack of positive LD role models in the media, especially celebrities with LDs, as noted by my participants.

Marcus's “take” on the identity and needs of mildly LD students being the same as non-LD students could be derived from several experiential factors, including his exposure to media representations. Supporting his view that SLDs are the same as students who are non-LD, Marcus elaborated: "When they show a classroom in the media, you rarely see a student who has an LD" (Interview, September 22, 2015). The uniformity of student ability in classrooms often captured by mass media platforms is clearly not in line with real life, but it can help inform perceptions about what a classroom should look like. Cameron and Cook (2013) address the potential risk of teachers neglecting the special needs of mildly disabled pupils if they expect those mildly disabled pupils to have the same social skills and other abilities as ‘normal’ pupils. This was not the case with Marcus, who said he is careful to ensure he inconspicuously provides mildly LD students with their required accommodations. Despite this, Marcus's actions can still be connected to his media consumption. His compassion for his LD students is analogous to the compassion demonstrated by Mr. Falker to a dyslexic student in one of Marcus's favourite stories, Thank you Mr. Falker (Polacco, 1998). The feelings and behaviour of all three participants towards their LD students was idiosyncratic and specific to their personal background, including the media they consumed.
4.4 Teacher Strategies for Debunking LD Stereotypes in the Mainstream Classroom

4.4.1 Discussions

Participants unanimously supported open dialogue with their class about how individuals learn in different ways and have different strengths and weaknesses. They recognized the inherent value in encouraging students to use politically correct terms like Gifted, Exceptional and LD. And, they all spoke to the importance of discussing LDs in a general way in the classroom, so LD students are not singled out. At the beginning of an activity, Lucy illustrated by example that she always reminds her students it is not appropriate to brag about how easy the activity was to complete if they happen to finish early. “The next activity might be harder for them, but easier for other students” (Interview, October 7, 2015). In this way, Lucy concludes she has set a tone that discourages students from making judgments about people who learn at a different pace. Sarah also favoured telling non-LD students why students with LD receive accommodations, in order to reduce the possibility they will misconstrue teacher assistance as favouritism. The advantages of constant communication with LD students and dialogue about LDs are shared by additional research studies (Valle et. al, 2004). All my participants further explained that professional conversations with special education teachers and informal conversations with people with LD enhanced their personal understanding of the trials, tribulations, resilience and variability of LD identity.

4.4.2 Analyzing LD Stories

Each teacher agreed there are strong benefits from reading books or showing their class movies that tell the story of a real person with an LD. My participants also held similar requirements for stories and pedagogy in order to reach and teach LDs in a respectful way. The
detrimental aspects of stories with LD characters included hopelessness, silliness, derogatory language and a focus on LD attributes above other human qualities/characteristics. They had complementary answers about how and when to read stories about LDs in the classroom, and the cornerstone of their methodology is to ensure LD students feel part of the classroom community and not singled out. This is why Sarah was wary of introducing a story about a character with a salient LD to her class at the start of the school year. Seasoned professional Lucy also posed that educators should introduce students to the concept of LD through stories that do not focus on LD, but "just happen to have [LD] characters" (Interview, October 7, 2015). Conversely, crip theorists support the use of stories that do emphasize a character's disability. Their logic is media that frames disabilities as secondary or subordinate attributes of an individual's identity risks trivializing crip identity and transmitting an ableist message – namely, disabilities are undesirable and inferior to able-bodied characteristics (McRuer, 2006). Ironically, Lucy could not come up with one children's story that includes a child with mild LD. Sarah, however, used a barrage of positive fictional story characters with characteristics of mild LD to introduce students to the concept of multiple intelligences and different learning styles. In her classroom, Sarah refers to clips from movies like *Kung Fu Panda* (Cobb & Osborne, 2008), in which the main character Po struggles to learn kung fu in the traditional way. The Harry Potter book series was also referenced by Sarah, because the eponymous hero struggles to learn the incantations for potion-brewing spells and procedures and is also aided by Hermione. Sarah said she uses novel studies that coincidentally feature mildly LD characters (e.g. Percy Jackson) with traits she can elaborate on and turn into teachable moments.

Unlike her two other colleagues who participated in my study, Sarah did not just teach students about different learning styles, she also encouraged students to analyze and deconstruct
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media stereotypes about LDs. Sarah described an innovative pedagogy that utilizes negative media representations of LDs as a teaching tool. She explained how stereotypical media representations of LD people or people with the characteristics of LDs provide an "opportunity for teachers to show our students things we really want them to examine, question and think critically about. One of the parts of being a critical thinker is to ask: Does this really make sense? Does this represent reality? What are they trying to say? Are there any hidden messages?"

(Interview, October 1, 2015). Again, this is done in a way that does not deliberately focus on LDs, but is a by-product of another topic or subject. For instance, after her Grade 4/5 novel study of *Percy Jackson & The Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (Riordan, 2005), Sarah showed the class the movie version of the book. After watching the movie, the class was curious why Percy's LD was emphasized more in the book than in the movie. The young teacher guided this discrepancy into a whole-class discussion about different forms of media and their goals, as well as a conversation about the concept and perception of LD. Deconstructing media representations of people with LDs was part of Sarah's Language Arts program for Grade 4/5 Gifted students. In my opinion, all teachers should implement programs like this. These programs align with the goals of the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2006) junior and intermediate Language Arts curriculum, as well as the capabilities and interests of junior and intermediate level students. It is noteworthy, however, that the narrative of Percy Jackson is not an ideal medium for exploring and de-stigmatizing LD identity, because Percy is labelled as a demigod – someone outside the realm of the ordinary, everyday LD individual.

4.4.3 Advocacy

Lucy was confident that today’s SLDs who react negatively to their LD identification would benefit significantly from adult advocates/authority figures (parents or teachers) who can
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support their needs and explain the meaning of their LD. As a former special education teacher and teacher of special education teachers, Lucy's perspective on the current state of adult perceptions of students with LD and LD student self-perceptions should be cultivated. Even though LD students are now included in mainstream classes and some students genuinely feel accepted in the classroom community, Lucy and the other participants noticed that some mildly LD students have few friends, avoid non-LD students and exhibit low self-esteem. Lucy blamed herself and other educators for not taking the time and effort to explain the meaning of a specific LD to parents and SLDs. "If the kids have a strong teacher or parent advocate, they don't have negative reactions to an LD identification" (Interview, October 7, 2015). At the same time, it is worth considering Lucy’s remark that some children are exposed to such an excess of media, its influence is equivalent to that of a parent or a close friend. Unfortunately, many representations of LD characters (e.g. Joey Jeremiah from Degrassi) demonstrate angry and depressive reactions to an LD diagnosis. If teachers and parents avoid explaining to students with LDs how to advocate for themselves, media representations have free rein to inculcate ableist views, as highlighted by crip theorists (Clare, 1999; McRuer, 2006).

4.5 Conclusion

In summary, my data analysis gleaned unexpected findings regarding the influence of mainstream media on teacher perceptions and expectations of their students with mild LD and their own self-perceptions and expectations as teachers of pupils with mild LD. Participants had an individualistic view of LD identity, but they also tended to lump mildly LD students into the category of "normal". More important, and in line with findings published by Perepa and Samsel (2013), my participants denied any connection between their teaching practices and media representations of people with LD. My data analysis revealed that participants are nonetheless
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inspired by media representations of both SLDs and teachers of SLDs. Media representations of SLDs proved to be contradictory, offering both positive role models and insider perspectives and unrealistic and exaggerated characterizations. Two of my participants overestimated the social skills of their mildly LD students and one admitted to overlooking the academic needs of students with mild LDs, all in sync with media representations familiar to the participants. Although there was no conclusive evidence to determine whether media representations had a significant impact on teacher perceptions and expectations, the data collected suggests media representations may have played a supporting role in shaping teacher perceptions and expectations of their LD students.

There was some evidence to suggest a causal link between common stereotypical perceptions of people with LDs and media exaggerations of LD characteristics. All my participants noticed a media propensity and bias to portray extreme and exaggerated forms of LD. One participant, in reflection of the statistics from the NCLD (2014), expressed that most people are prone to associate an LD identification with a more extreme disability. I was surprised to learn that while these teachers were amply concerned about the implications of negative media representations on public opinion, they privately continued to watch sensationalized media. They found it neither unprofessional nor contradictory that they view TV shows or movies or read books and other published works at home that feature ableist themes while promoting inclusivity of differently-abled students in their classrooms. Pending further research, my findings are not generalizable, but they do offer rich fodder for future investigations into the relationship between popular media representations of LDs and teacher perceptions and expectations of LD students. A more in-depth discussion of the implications of my study can be found in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS

5.0 Introduction to the Chapter

Both fictional and non-fictional examples of stereotypical and discriminatory portrayals of disabled people are found in virtually every mass media delivery platform, catering to every demographic market from street-culture to high-culture (Bogdan et al., 2012). My primary research question addressed: In what ways are three elementary school teachers' perceptions and expectations of their mildly learning disabled students influenced by LD imagery in popular media? My sub-questions asked: How do past media portrayals of LDs influence the current views teachers have of their LD students? What strategies do teachers employ in the classroom to debunk the myths of LD people as stupid, pitiful or satirical? Following in the footsteps of crip theorist Robert McRuer (2006), my study untangled and deciphered the narratives of mild LD embodiments that play both prominently and subtly in the life stories and teaching practices of three mainstream elementary school teachers. In Chapter 4, I documented positive and distinct individual teacher stories, as well as stereotypically negative narratives. The revelation of both positive and negative preconceptions about LD students is valuable knowledge for educators.

This chapter recaps my key findings, discusses the implications of my research, and makes recommendations for further study.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

My data analysis gleaned unexpected findings about the influence of mainstream media on teacher perceptions of their students with mild LD and their own self-perceptions as teachers of students with special needs. Participants had an individualistic view of LD identity, but they also tended to lump mildly LD students into the category of "normal". More important, and like
the findings published by Perepa and Samsel (2013), when my participants were directly asked whether media representations of LD influence their teaching practices, they firmly denied any connection. Even so, my data analysis revealed that participants were inspired by media representations of both SLDs and teachers of SLDs. Participants openly admitted they were inspired by the equitable teaching practices (e.g. differentiated instruction) and positive attitudes (e.g. compassion) demonstrated by fictional teachers in popular media, including books, TV, and movies.

Media representations of SLDs reveal the contradiction of positive role models and insider perspectives against the backdrop of unrealistic and exaggerated characterizations. Two of my participants overestimated the social skills of their mildly LD students and one admitted to overlooking the academic needs of students with mild LDs, all in line with media representations that participants were familiar with. Even though there is no conclusive evidence to determine whether media representations have a significant impact on teacher perceptions and expectations, the data collected suggests media representations may play a supporting role in shaping teacher perceptions and expectations.

All my participants noticed a media propensity and bias to portray extreme and exaggerated forms of LD. One participant, in alignment with statistics from the NCLD (2014), expressed that most people are prone to associate an LD identification with a more extreme disability (e.g. mild intellectual disability). I was surprised these teachers were concerned about the implications of negative media representations on public opinion, yet they continued to watch sensationalized media themselves. All of the participants neither found it unprofessional nor contradictory that they view TV shows or movies or read books and articles at home that feature ableist themes while promoting inclusivity of differently abled students in their classrooms. They
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did not attribute an ethical dimension to the sensational media they consume – it was simply trivial entertainment to them.

The use of LD media representations in the classroom was inconsistent among the participants, with the most experienced teacher unable to find any representations of LDs in the media worth showing her students, and the least experienced participant actively exposing her students to multiple LD media representations throughout the school year. Each participant had a unique personal history, yet they all embraced and promoted similar strategies for debunking LD myths and understanding human differences, such as encouraging open discussions, defining appropriate terminology (e.g. LD, exceptional), instructing LD students in self-advocacy and analyzing stories with characters that have LD characteristics.

5.2 Implications

My study of socio-cultural narratives in relation to a teacher’s view of LD students has both superficial and deep educational implications. The purpose of this study is to aid teacher awareness and knowledge of the buried or internal biases that exist towards students with LDs. There are implications for the kinds of texts – like narratives acknowledging the unique identity of individuals with LD and resist normative able-bodied ideology – which Teacher Colleges use to prepare instructor candidates and teachers to discuss differences in their classroom (e.g. Thank you Mr. Falker [Polacco, 1998], Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key [Gantos, 1998], and Flowers for Algernon [Keyes, 1966]). There are also implications for the narratives teachers include in their lessons, the ways teachers interact with LD students in the classroom and the kinds of media they choose to consume in their personal time. Even though there are policies in place to give LD students the same right to educational success as those who are non-LD students, ableist-driven stories continue to cast a shadow and impact individual perceptions inside and outside the
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classroom (Goodfellow, 2014; Shifrer, 2013). As seen through the eyes of my participants, LD characters lack realism, variability – and screen time. Ableist themes encapsulated in popular media go largely unchallenged and unnoticed in communities and schools. If LD representations continue to negate and contrast the proportion and variability of LD identity in contemporary society, my participants fear that individual perceptions of LDs are susceptible to gross distortions. The hard work of teachers to make an inclusive community of learners inside the classroom risks being damaged and/or undermined (Nusbaum, 2013). Discriminatory and ableist stories that loom and lurk in mainstream media representations contribute to this threat.

5.2.1 Broad: The Educational Research Community

Even though my participants claimed to compartmentalize their media consumption and their professional practice, teachers are not immune to the influence of media representations of disability (Perepa & Samsel, 2013; Woolfson & Brady, 2009). Researchers and teachers should be aware of the omnipresence of ableist ideas and stories in society that threaten to impinge school environments and influence individual perceptions (Sapon-Shevin, 2015). A person's distinction between fictional entertainment and factual information is fluid and relative, something that is dependent on their education, experience and use of critical thinking from one moment to the next. It is an utter misconception that media influence is restricted to the uneducated general public (McLuhan & Fiore, 1969). Media influences everybody, in every facet of personal and professional life (McLuhan & Fiore, 1969). Considering the lack of research on media images of disability and people's perceptions (Perepa & Samsel, 2013), universities and academic institutions should consider investing in further research that explores how media representations of disability – both mental and physical – impact the perceptions and expectations of teachers, administrators, principals, students and parents.
Researchers exploring media influence might look to the use of questionnaires as verification of disclosed opinions through the interview process. In many answers to their interview questions, Perepa and Samsel (2013) uncover that the participants “feel that their teaching practice is not influenced by what they view on television and in films” (p. 143). By contrast, their questionnaire responses indicate “the vast majority acknowledged that their understanding of disabilities was [influenced by what they view on TV/film]” (my emphasis) (Perepa & Samsel, 2013, p. 143). Perepa and Samsel (2013) infer that the contradiction between teacher perceptions of media influence and their professional beliefs and practices is reflective of the different methods used to collect data (i.e. interviews vs. questionnaires). Even though my participants iterated the same answers in both interview and questionnaire format, this does not discount the potential value of supplementary questionnaires on personal topics like media consumption.

Taking into account that my participants highlighted a correlation between common assumptions about disabilities and media representations of extreme disabilities, there is a particular need to investigate the relationship between media images and perceptions of severe disabilities. Emerging during participant interviews are several media stereotypes about LD students (e.g. pitiable, stupid, comedic, dangerous) that go largely unchallenged and unquestioned in schools, and educators would benefit from a focused scholarly investigation with several mainstream teachers.

The perceptions, expectations and roles of teachers are intertwined with media images for better and for worse. My participants were admittedly inspired by fictional accounts of compassionate and fair teachers, yet they were more than a little concerned about the impact of sensational media that depicted people with LDs as comedic and/or pitiable imbeciles. There is a
general need in the academic and professional communities to critically analyze how media representations influence knowledge constructions of minority groups in Western society, including, but not limited to: Natives, Africans, Asians and Crips. It would be unfair to claim that media consumers are the only stakeholders who are impacted by the perpetuation of non- and anti-discriminatory media content. Those who create and generate media content – actors, directors, scriptwriters, re-enactors and news content organizations, among others – are the ones who do the “impacting” and the ones responsible for ensuring media representations are diverse, realistic and non-discriminatory. In short, participant responses indicate that inclusive education practices can be bolstered by more pro-actively-driven positive LD media representations and more critical viewing of LD representations.

5.2.2 Narrow: Teacher Identity and Practice

The feelings and behaviour of all three participants towards their LD students was idiosyncratic and specific to their personal background, including the media they consume. A depth of teaching experience increases one's understanding of the academic and social performances of SLDs, but an equal – if not more powerful – learning tool is listening to the narratives of real-life LD people, as confirmed by the results of other studies (Perepa & Samsel, 2013; Valle et al., 2004). My three participants referenced encounters with LD people – both face-to-face (students, friends and colleagues) and virtually (movies, TV programs, books) – and individuals who have a close connection to SLDs (parents and SERTs) as vital contributors to their understanding of LD identity. It merits noting, however, my most experienced and understanding participant was reluctant to utilize media with LD representations in her classroom, suggesting the educational benefits of LD media representations are overlooked.
and/or poorly understood. Effective teaching depends on building upon what students already know, including the media content they consume. If teachers dismiss the resource of popular media to aid discussions on LDs or don’t have the media savvy to locate media portrayals of LD people or students with learning difficulties, they miss capitalizing on a vibrant area of student background knowledge (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 5).

In what looks like a trade-off, one participant mentions how the needs of severely disabled students tend to overshadow the needs of mildly disabled students. An LD student’s ability to handle independent work does not mean she/he does not face formidable obstacles that, without teacher assistance (including minor prompts and signs of encouragement), can stifle motivation and damage self-efficacy (Klassen & Lynch, 2007). The tendency to overlook the needs of students with mild and moderate LDs is common and teachers need to address this (Shuster, Hemmeter, & Ault, 2001). One of the primary tenets of inclusive education – "support in the most heterogeneous and appropriate environment" (Winzer, 2008, p. 43) – is undermined when the special needs of mildly LD students are neglected and they become, as one participant described, "kids that fall through the cracks" (Interview, October 7, 2015).

5.3 Recommendations

Based on my findings, I have several recommendations for mainstream teachers. Providing assistance to students with mild disabilities, especially the aids documented on IEPs, should not be overlooked or ignored by mainstream teachers (Shuster, Hemmeter, & Ault, 2001). At the same time, the urge to improve SLDs should always be critically analyzed to filter out any intentions of assimilation, normalization and the tainting of LD identity. In short, a teacher’s implementation of IEP accommodations should be tempered by an ongoing analysis (through observation and discussion) of how a student responds to and feels about extra assistance
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(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Teachers should be wary about endorsing the belief that they know everything about their students (i.e. they know the full story that comprises a student's life). The notion of absolute understanding can breed an illusory and potentially detrimental sense of mastery and control over others. "Narrative coherence," argues esteemed feminist Judith Butler (2005), "may foreclose an ethical resource – namely, an acceptance of the limits of knowability in oneself and others" (p. 63).

Deconstructing media representations of people with LDs was part of Sarah’s Language Arts program for Grade 4/5 Gifted students. In my opinion, all junior and intermediate level teachers should implement programs like this. It aligns with the goals of the Ontario Ministry of Education’s (2006) Language Arts curriculum, as well as the capabilities and interests of junior and intermediate level students.

In their role as "cultural workers", teachers can help abate the popularity of LD stereotypes by deconstructing and/or rejecting media that uphold ableist – and more frequently flexible ableist – agendas. Making the conscious choice to watch, read about or listen to the ridicule of LD people or LD characteristics sends the message that certain ableist mentalities are permissible and justified. To be clear, I am not suggesting that teachers stop engaging in sensational media – this would be an impossible task in our digital age, where the internet lives on your fingertips. Rather, I urge teachers to be critical and responsible viewers of all media and to engage in sensational storylines with the active intention of uncovering, debunking and deconstructing stereotypes in collaboration with other community members, including, but not limited to, students. To foster inclusive practices inside the general classroom, teachers should try to expand the scope and standards of their professional responsibility to include the media they consume – both intentionally and unintentionally – outside the classroom.
Lucy remarked that some children are exposed to such an excess of media, its influence is equivalent to that of a parent or a close friend. Unfortunately, many representations of LD characters (e.g. Joey Jeremiah from *Degrassi*) focus on angry, depressive and stereotypical reactions to an LD diagnosis. Teachers and parents need to explain to students with LD how to advocate for themselves; otherwise media representations have free rein to inculcate ableist views, as highlighted by crip theorists (Clare, 1999; McRuer, 2006).

### 5.4 Areas for Further Research

I hope my study sparks new avenues of research into the connection between media representations and teacher perceptions of special needs students, as well as foster open dialogue on the subject. My study focuses on teacher perceptions and LD embodiment, but it is important to investigate how people in other authoritative positions in schools (e.g. principals, administrators, custodians) perceive the relationship between disability representations and LD students. The media’s influence on student perceptions can provide a further source of information that is currently lacking in research on LD embodiment. As schools are increasingly pressured to be more inclusive and media becomes even more integrated into our daily lives, it is essential that researchers explore the power of stories to influence teacher perceptions of disabled students. It is worthwhile to initiate qualitative studies that investigate media influence on teacher perceptions of a wide variety of student minority groups, including: students with mental health illnesses (e.g. Bipolar), language challenges (e.g. ELLs), behavioural issues (e.g. ADHD), physical disabilities and exceptionalities other than LD (e.g. autism, intellectual disability, developmental disability).
5.5 Concluding Comments

Contrary to popular belief, consuming media can have ethical implications (McLuhan & Fiore, 1969) – what we choose to watch, read about or listen to makes us complicit in and essential to their existence and demographic reach (Riley, 2005). My study does not aim to blame or criticize teachers for watching ableist media. Rather, I hope it illustrates the potency and complexity of media to affect the way we think, and, the need to employ critical and responsible engagement at all times. Educational policies (e.g. Learning for All) would imply the end of discriminatory practices that aim to exclude disabled students from acceptance and success in schools and local communities, yet popular media repeatedly propounds the flexible ableist message that disabled identity should be tolerated (not respected) by able-bodied individuals. The mainstream teacher needs to acknowledge the power of media to condition, even foster, the perceptions of students, parents, colleagues and themselves. Depending on how they are perceived and used, LD media representations can be either a bane or a boost to inclusive education.
References


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Preface: I’m going to ask you some questions about students with learning disabilities and popular media. When I refer to popular mass media, I am referring to the universe of many mainstream information sources available to us today, including movies, TV, newspapers, magazines, books, radio, public service documents, advertising campaigns, the internet and social media platforms.

1) What was the last popular media content you were engaged in?

2) Of the popular media you have access to, what is your favourite go-to information and entertainment source?

3) Have you read, heard or seen a story in popular media about LDs or SLDs in the last week? Month? Year? Longer? Never? Tell me a little bit about the story.

4) How would you define a disability?

5) How would you define a learning disability?

6) How would you define a mild learning disability?

7) What are some of the academic expectations you have of your mildly LD students in Language Arts?

8) What are some of the social expectations you have of your mildly LD students?

9) Are there any role models in popular media that you do or do not identity with as a teacher of special education students? Who? Why?

10) Are there any LD characters in popular media that you think represent good role models for mildly LD students? If so, who and why? Have you ever read Patricia Pollacco’s Thank you, Mr. Falker or Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key?

11) Are there any LD characters in popular media that you think represent bad role models for mildly LD students? If so, who and why? Have you seen the character Ralph Wiggum in the show The Simpsons?

12) I am going to show you a short compilation of various film and television show segments that depict LD people as either stupid, pitiful or satirical. How do these media representations compare to your actual classroom experiences with LD students?

13) What strategies do you employ in the classroom as a teacher to debunk the myths of LD people as stupid, pitiful or satirical?
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14) Can you think of any fictional and/or non-fictional character(s) that resemble any of your current or past mildly LD students?

15) How are individuals with LDs represented in mass media? Why do you think that is?

16) How do media representations of LDs influence or not influence your own beliefs about mildly LD individuals? Why or why not?

17) Do you think you have a partial understanding or a complete understanding of the special needs and personal feelings of your mildly LD students? Why or why not?

18) When you were a young student, do you remember being exposed to LDs inside or outside the classroom? What do you remember from your early classroom LD exposure? Were you ever exposed to good role models for or representations of people with LDs in popular media? If so, how has the media portrayal of LDs or LD characters changed/not changed since you were in elementary school?

19) Do you believe that media portrayals of LDs are true, helpful or inaccurate based on your experience in the classroom? Are non-fictional accounts more helpful in understanding LDs than fictional narratives?

20) In your opinion, what popular media most influences the perceptions we have of LDs?
Appendix B: Questionnaire

1) What type of mass media do you come into contact with or seek out most frequently?

2) What type of mass media do you believe most influences public perception? Television programs, movies, internet clips (YouTube), social media, books, or other?

3) Rate the academic abilities of your mildly LD students using one of these words: Excellent, Good, Satisfactory or Incomplete.

4) Rate the social abilities of your mildly LD students using one of these words: Excellent, Good, Satisfactory or Incomplete.

5) Rate your understanding of mildly LD students using one of these words: Excellent, Good, Satisfactory or Incomplete.

6) Do media representations of LDs inform or not inform your views about your mildly LD students?

7) Are media representations of LDs accurate? Highly, moderately, somewhat or not at all?

8) Have mass media representations of SLDs changed over your life time? Highly, moderately, somewhat, or not at all?

9) Are contemporary mass media representations of LDs supportive and encouraging for SLDs? Highly, moderately, somewhat, or not at all?

10) Which of the following words best describes the majority of LD characters featured in popular culture: intelligent, popular, pitiable, laughable, dangerous, or none of the above?

11) Which of the following words best describes the majority of SLDs you have taught: intelligent, popular, pitiable, laughable, dangerous, or none of the above?
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Appendix C: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ___________________

Dear ________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying the relationship between mass media representations of people with learning difficulties and teacher perceptions/expectations of SLDs for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr.___________________. My research supervisor is _____________________. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of one 60 minute interview that will be tape-recorded, as well as one short questionnaire. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Researcher name: _______________________________
Phone number, email: _______________________________
TALES FROM THE CRIP

Instructor’s Name: ____________________________
Phone number: ____________________________ Email: ____________________________

Research Supervisor’s Name: ____________________________
Phone #: ____________________________ Email: ____________________________

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by ____________________________(name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ____________________________

Name (printed): ____________________________

Date: ____________________________