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## **Equity by Design:**

The Intersections of  
Learning Dis/ability, Ethnicity, and  
Emotionality in Education:

*The Voice of Sophia Cruz*

**David Hernández-Saca**

# The Intersections of Learning Dis/ability, Ethnicity, and Emotionality in Education: *The Voice of Sophia Cruz*

## Executive Summary

### Purpose

Students of Color with dis/abilities are often among the most marginalized in public schools. The Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center recognizes the importance of attending to students' intersecting identities, and the layers of assets that exist and oppressions they experience at those intersections. In this brief, I summarize a journal article from a three-year qualitative study (Hernández-Saca, 2016; 2019) about the experiences of Latinx students, such as Sophia Cruz, who was labeled with a learning disability (LD), and the meanings she associated with LD. The study centers student voice (Gonzalez, Hernández-Saca, & Artiles, 2017) within the traditional special education field of LD (e.g., Bryan, Burstein, & Ergul, 2004; Fletcher, 2012) to better understand LD at the intersection of power and identities.

### Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences of Latinx students with LD related to being labeled with LD?
2. What are the understandings of the idea of LD held by Latinx students with LD?

### Findings

Based on a three-year qualitative-study using critical ethnographic methods, this study centered Sophia Cruz's experiences, who has a reading and writing LD. Findings indicated:

- Sophia experienced the “hegemony of smartness,” or the false and oppressive belief that due to her LD, accompanying label and being in special education, she was “not smart” compared to her non-labeled peers.
- Sophia experienced disability micro-aggressions in and around school settings, which impacted her psychological and emotional well-being
- Sophia understood the idea of *LD as a double-edge sword*: both positive and negative, and “*LDness*” as carrying more than one meaning. Her prominent view of LD was the image of *a slow learner*.
- Sophia's lived experience and understanding of the idea of LD were informed by psycho-emotional disablement—psychological and emotional consequences of disability labels that can restrict someone's ability to act in society—and the politics of hope. For Sophia, psycho-emotional disablement played out in her classroom and home with peers, teachers, and siblings via individual and structural ableism<sup>1</sup>. Sophia's experience also manifested the politics of hope, in her quest for help given her position as a student. Nevertheless, Sophia understood herself as LD and internalized the overarching conceptions of LD and ableism in her school and in society.

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<sup>1</sup>For example, the underlying false beliefs and practices that discriminate and devalue students with dis/abilities.

## Introduction

### *Centering the Voices of Students with LD at the Intersections*

Researchers have contributed a wealth of knowledge about the cognitive side of LD, including educational and psychological interventions, identifying the importance of meta-cognitive skills—including academic, social, and emotional skills. Meta-cognitive skills include planning, self-instructions, and performance and self-monitoring in academic, social or emotional tasks (Bender, 2004). Within LD literature some researchers stress that students with LD lack meta-cognition (Sencibaught, 2005). Relatedly, Elias (2004) defines several characteristics of socioemotional learning (SEL) connected to metacognition:

1. Recognizing emotions in self and others
2. Regulating and managing strong emotions (positive and negative)
3. Respecting others and self and appreciating differences (p. 54)

Despite the rich literature on socioemotional aspects of LDs, there is a significant need to extend this work. Specifically, there is limited literature to identify students' affective and emotional sense-making of their LD label in ways that foreground culture and equity (Arzubiaga, Artiles, King, & Harris-Murri, 2008). This gap led Hernández-Saca (2016, 2019) to examine the intersectional lives of Latinx students with LD, their emotion-laden talk about being labeled with LD, and their understanding of the idea of LD<sup>2</sup>.

Research on the social and emotional dimensions of LD suggests that these students suffer from depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, difficulty making friends, and loneliness (Bryan, Burstein, & Ergul, 2004).

Hyperactivity, aggression, teasing and bullying—as both the target and aggressor—are also associated with the social and emotional profiles of students with LD (Forness & Kavale, 1997).

One key assumption in the LD field is that emotional and social impairments are exclusively located “in the individual.” On the contrary, the distinctive characteristics of children and youth with LDs are emotionally, socially, culturally, and historically shaped (Hernandez-Saca, 2017). Therefore, it is important to document the perspectives and experiences of youth and adults with LDs. Some scholars suggest that students with LDs creatively navigate multiple social and emotional worlds in addition to disability, such as class, race, and gender (Connor, 2008; Ferri & Connor, 2010). Missing in this work is an exploration of affect, emotionality, intersectionality and the role of socio-cultural historical developmental perspectives for the lives of students with LD at their intersections of power and identities. Research must highlight these neglects, with particular attention to the



***Attribution: [Illustration of a fingerprint centered in the foreground, with several overlapping, different colored faces, positioned in opposite directions, in the background.]***

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<sup>2</sup>Please see Hernández-Saca (2016) for more details on the larger three-year qualitative study.

affective and emotional dimensions of LD and intersections with race, national origin, class, gender, and language, among other forms of difference.

Focusing on one case study within a larger three-year qualitative study, this *Equity by Design* brief aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of Latinx students with LD related to being labeled with LD?
2. What are the understandings of the idea of LD held by Latinx students with LD?



*Attribution: [Latinx elementary-aged girl student, sitting at a classroom desk, smiling, holding a pencil in the writing position.]*

## Methods

### *Interdisciplinary, Critical Ethnographic and Qualitative Methods*

Across a three-year dissertation study, I used interdisciplinary, critical ethnographic and qualitative methods. These consisted of: using critical ethnographic site and participant observations; in-depth individual and focus group interviewing; writing ethnographic field notes through the use of memos; collecting

<sup>3</sup>All names are pseudonyms, including participants and school names.

district and school level educational statistics and through student interviews about their background and sociocultural context at home and at school and taking into account issues of power; etic and emic perspectives; and researcher positionality (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

### *Researcher Positionality*

My researcher positionality included identities and life experiences that I brought with me to the research process. Ravitch and Riggan (2012) state that a researcher's stance comes from one's personal interests and includes the "curiosities, biases, and ideological commitments, theories of action, and epistemological assumptions, all of which are profoundly influenced by your social location, institutional position, and life experience" (p. 10). My multiple identities—as gay, bilingual in Spanish and English, Latino, El Salvadorian and Palestinian, my schooling experiences and family position as the youngest of six, and a son to a single mother, my relationship with my father, and my language use history—all have influenced how I make meaning of the world and myself in it. The most important influence on my positionality, however, is my life living with an LD. My research agenda is troubling the common-sense assumptions about what LDs are. My review of the literature and my research agenda influenced my research questions and topics for the larger study to center the voices of historically marginalized youth with LD. My ethnicity as Latinx and label of an auditory LD also influenced my decision to work with Latinx youth with LD, such as Sophia.

### *Description of Larger Study*

The larger dissertation study examined the emotion-laden talk (Moir, 2005) of three Latina/o students with Learning Disabilities (LD) about being labeled with LD, and their understanding of the idea of LD. I analyzed the students' self-

constructions (Prior, 2016), that is, their self-narrativizations (Gee, 2001) through their emotion-laden talk to answer the study's research questions. The study included Sophia Cruz<sup>3</sup>, Bianca Edith Pueblo, and Daniel Martinez, their parents, their special education resource room, and language arts teachers.

The focal participant in this brief, Sophia Cruz, is a Mexican-American, working-class 13-year-old female student, bilingual in Spanish and English, and in the seventh grade. Sophia was labeled with a Learning Disability (LD) and a Speech and Language Impairment (SLI). Outside of school, Sophia saw a child psychologist and speech therapist. Sophia was able to coordinate all of these activities inside and outside of school with the support of her mother, Luciana Cruz. Luciana is a Mexican, 40-year-old working-class female who is bilingual in Spanish and English. Her dominant language is Spanish, so she and I conducted all interviews in Spanish. Luciana was born in a major city in Mexico, but soon after birth, moved to a Mexican city that shared a border with the U.S. Luciana's family lived there for nineteen years before moving to the U.S. Southwest.

### **Data Collection**

I conducted interviews to gather Sophia's lived experiences with LD. I conducted a total of 41 hours 35 minutes and 57 seconds of interview time with Sophia, Luciana and her teachers. I audio-recorded and transcribed the interviews.

### **Analysis Procedures**

The focus of these interviews was Sophia's emotion-laden talk, informed by the notion of emotion discourse (Moir, 2015). I used descriptive coding to identify emotion-laden talk using thematic analysis of Sophia's personal narratives, self-reflections, meta-commentary, and dialogue.

Emotion discourse is situated within social practices and is identified within the reactions,

responses, opinions, etc. of students' interview data (Moir 2005). During interviews, I focused on the "WHATs"—the content of their responses—and the "HOWs"—the ways in which they indexed emotionality through emotion implicative WHATs (Prior, 2016) and intensifiers (Labov, 1984). Emotion implicative WHATs are topics, statements, questions, and responses that invoked emotionality due to sociocultural norms and standards (Prior, 2016). Prior (2016) states "speakers can also do emotion-implicative work through topic selection (e.g., discrimination, trauma, complaints) and implying cause and effect...without specifically labeling emotions" (p. 109). Intensifiers (e.g., adverbs such as *really*, *so*, *very*, *kinda*, *kind of*, etc.) that are attached to the linguistic mode of expression and/or explicit labeling of emotions or orientation to emotions (e.g., *SO mad*, *REALLY upset*, *a LITTLE worried*, etc.) are the indices of social and emotional expression within the linguistic responses and statements of speakers, in this case, the students (Labov, 1984). Seventeen lines of emotion-laden talk were identified in Sophia's interviews (For a description of how the teacher and parent interview data were analyzed, please see Hernández-Saca (2019)).

### **Findings**

#### ***Being LD: Sophia's Emotional Sense-Making***

Sophia made sense of her experiences with the LD label in complex ways. First, she was aware that having a LD label placed her in a lower-status location in a context that privileged smartness. Second, Sophia experienced disability micro-aggressions that were institutional and interpersonal and created individual psychological consequences that affected her in navigating her social and emotional world in and around school.

*The hegemony of smartness.* Sophia Cruz was aware of the ableist hierarchy that the false and oppressive ideology of smartness created institutionally, interpersonally and

individually. Sophia navigated “smartness,” both internally and externally. I argue that “smartness” is a typical belief system within U.S. school culture that creates and sustains the larger individualistic and meritocratic distinction between those “*not so smart*” and those “*who are smarter*.” These ideologies are hegemonic given that they do not necessarily originate within the neurology and biology of students such as Sophia, but are emotionally, historically, culturally and socially constructed within socioemotional contexts in schools, and their discursive practices. These constructs are present within larger mechanisms of dominant school culture in U.S. society.



**Attribution:** [Photo of a Black woman teacher, sitting cross-legged on the floor, holding a book open to her classroom of elementary-aged students of Color of various genders, who are also sitting cross-legged, facing the teacher.]

The hegemony of smartness permeated Sophia’s narratives, and she shared: “*It feels that some person is better than you* because [you] don’t understand something... and *they think that they’re better than you* just because they’re *smarter* than you...” (Sophia 9/17/14). Sophia situated the hegemony of smartness in the emotion-implicative ‘*the feelings of someone being smarter than you*’ topic since not everyone learns and understands at the same pace. Sophia

expressed the salience of smartness ideologically—that is, expressed the logic behind the phenomena of smartness—but also emotionally, since she emphasized the feeling one gets (i.e. *that they are better than you*) due to the logic of smartness.

Being held back in school was an impactful experience for Sophia that she associated with LD. At the time of the larger study, Sophia was in the seventh grade; she explained how she thought about her LD in relation to school retention:

Like if am *upset* that why am in seventh grade and am supposed to be in eighth grade...am like, “Oh, it’s because of my learning disability, or something”...[and] actually, it only happens when am like at school or like if they say that they’re *smarter* or something...And it keeps me thinking that, they’re *smarter* than me and am not ...*I get it twisted around* (Sophia 01/20/15).

It is clear that Sophia’s experience of being retained in school was emotionally charged, but it is also important to note how this experience was linked to her LD, and how it was embedded in the hegemony of smartness. Of significance, the ideology of smartness not only permeated Sophia’s school experiences, but also her interactions with peers and siblings.

The emotional underpinnings of Sophia’s sense-making about the ideology of smartness, in the context of having LD and having been retained, are evident in her reflections:

Inside of me, it makes me *feel bad* cause am a *little bit* slow at learning things and...I think to myself...that am not *smart*...So, *it’s like a twist*. Like it’s making you *feel bad*, but in the same way it’s making you *feel bad* instead of...thinking what you have already learned in the past...Because like I said it’s like you’re *thinking negative* and you’re like *mad* in the inside and *sad*

because you're in this grade and...you're not in high school, like you're supposed to be and you're in seventh grade. So, it's like...makes you **feel bad** and **sad** (Sophia 1/20/15).

The ideology of smartness that Sophia's reflections portray is power-laden since it implies a ranking of academic ability labels. But Sophia's agency—her ability to act—also enabled her to question this ideology as she relayed her ambivalence. Indeed, she shared "**it's like a twist**"—between feeling **sad, mad**, and "**not-so-smart**" (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011), while she also knew the bright side of this dark ideology was to connect with what she had learned ("**instead of**...thinking what you have already learned in the past), or needed to learn, since learning is a core purpose of school.

Sophia explained that LD could be a positive thing: "I think it could be a good thing because if you come to not know...like this problem or something and you can ask the teacher and they help you...*kind of*" (Sophia, 10/14/14). Sophia expressed a rational-utilitarian reason for the benefits of an LD label: *getting help from a teacher*.

Nevertheless, Sophia's lived experiences as an LD learner tended to emphasize the negative aspects of this label. These experiences also afforded her insights about the structural dimensions of the label, specifically how the ideology of smartness has *material consequences* in schools. For example, affording and constraining learning opportunities to various kinds of learners:

I would've think **negative things**. That being in a learning disability [class] makes you **feel like, you're not smart...** right now we have classes that are separated but one class, it's like mixed up with seventh and eighth graders... they say that that's a **smarter** class and then the rest of the class...**dumb** or something? But like a lot of people

would've wanted to be in that class...if they were *more smarter* (sic), cause if they...see that there's a **smarter** class, they want to be in it but they're not **smart**. They...think that they're *really smart*... **they think that they know everything**, and all...the people want to be in that class because they...have like **smart** kids in there...And then some people say, "Oh, why don't I,"... "Why am I not in the **smarter** class, if I am **smart**? And am like, "Well, probably, because it's full of other kids in there that are *really smart*... that's why they won't let you in"...there's a bunch of kids in there that are *really smart*...*Daniel is in the smart class...So that's why there's a bunch of people in the smart class...but he's in the smart class...a lot of people are saying like, "Oh, why am I not in the smart class, if am really smart?"* (Sophia 9/17/14).



**Attribution:** [Photo centering a Latinx middle-school aged girl student in the background, at her classroom desk; her hand is on her face, and she looks sad. There are two students sitting in the foreground, blurred.]

Sophia's use of the word "**smart**" (n=15) demonstrates the significance of smartness within her sense-making about being labeled LD. Equally important, Sophia was keenly conscious about schools' stratifying power in forming categories of 'otherness' as reflected in her use



**trust** through harmful talking or the potential spread of rumors by others about her LD. Trust, regarding one's identity as having LD, mattered deeply to her, and micro-aggressions she experienced exposed her and made her vulnerable to rejection, ridicule, and exclusion. It seems that LD is an ideological artifact and a sticky object (Ahmed, 2004)—a noun (i.e., person, place or thing)—that has an emotional significance attached to it. These associations have historical, cultural, economic and political interaction between the individual(s) or group and the noun—since LD's nature is not only psychological, but also sociocultural and political.

Sophia was acutely aware of how others might perceive her ability and disability within literacy and other school contexts. These institutional occasions placed students' identities into the binary of "competent" or "incompetent." Sophia illustrated this point:

Like in science when we're writing something, it happens there, because people are looking at your paper, "What did you spell, right there?" And they think that you spelled it wrong...(Sophia 10/14/14).

A recurrent instance in which micro-aggressions occurred when Sophia asked for help with academic tasks and then received hostile responses or offenses from her peers:

...Like if it comes to like I don't know how to spell this word then I ask my classmates and then they're like, "You don't know how to spell that word," and am like, "No." And then they spell it out for me...And then that's why I don't like asking people that question, like how to spell, cause it makes me **feel** that am **more dumb**... (Sophia 10/14/14).

It is important to note that micro-aggressions could get entwined with the hegemony of smartness as illustrated in this example—it made Sophia feel "more dumb." Moreover, Sophia consistently used intensifiers (e.g., *really*,

*too*, and *much*) when describing disability micro-aggressions, thus making evident the emotional intensity of these experiences.

But Sophia was not a passive recipient of micro-aggressions. She defended her dignity and her abilities ("Yeah, I don't know how to spell it"... "Sorry if am too slow at reading, at like spelling things") when receiving disability micro-aggressions from her peers and siblings. Micro-aggressions clearly have a heavy emotional load and Sophia's responses were equally charged with emotional energy. In the preceding example, she used the intensifier *too* as a form of amplification regarding her reading speed, as opposed to only stating she was "slow at



**Attribution:** [Photo of a whole apple sitting on a surface in front of a mirror. The apple's reflection is mostly eaten.]

reading" which would convey a more neutral intensity. In Labov's (1984) term, this neutral response is equal to what he term a "cognitive zero" intensification regarding her "slowness." Sophia elaborated:

It **feels irritating** when they tell you that... like if they ask you a question how to spell it, **can they just...Just like spell it and that's it, don't leave like any comments**...Like if it were my brother then I would ask him like how do you spell this and I wouldn't, it would've **feel**

**much better** if he wouldn't ask a question, like leave comments... "Like why? Like, **"You don't know how to spell that?"** ...**Like being mean** (Sophia 10/14/14).

Sophia's voice here illustrates her resistance against the unjust "comments" that her siblings left in the air. Sophia also experienced paralinguistic or non-verbal micro-aggressions. She shared:

Sometimes I don't like **reading** with somebody because their like, **"Ah!" (makes frustration gesture and lets out a burst of air to show how others respond to her while they read with her in their sign of frustration and rolls eyes)** like this. You're like reading, if am reading and I have a partner hearing, and am like I don't know this word, and their like, **"Ah!" (imitating her partner's frustration and Sophia lets out a burst of air and rolls her eyes)**, like this so that's why I'd rather read by myself... Well... when I have a partner with me **I feel, nervous, nervous** and... I try to think to myself to try my best (Sophia 10/14/14).

**Sophia was not a passive recipient of these aggressions, and her agency served a protective function in her experiences inside and outside of school.**

Like their racial counterparts, disability micro-aggressions were extreme (e.g., structural ableism such as segregation) and subtle (e.g., bullying due to ability differences). Both left affective marks on Sophia. The residual effect of these so-called benign "comments" were insidious and reminiscent of McDermott, Goldman, and Varenne's concept of (2006) "rumors" related to students with LD operating in the culture of schooling. These "rumors" (e.g., siblings' and peers' comments) hurt and are oppressive within the lived experiences of students with LD. Fortunately,

Sophia was not a passive recipient of these aggressions, and her agency served a protective function in her experiences inside and outside of school.

### **What is LD? A Unitary and Fragmented Notion**

*LD as a double-edged sword.* Sophia viewed LD as a double-edged sword due to the positive and negative consequences of being labeled as such. These consequences manifested themselves in Sophia's life through interaction between intrinsic (e.g., individual) and extrinsic (e.g., structural) factors (Shakespeare, 2006). For Sophia, internal factors included self-talk or meta-talk (meta-cognitive and meta-affective talk) about being labeled LD. These factors were largely negative. External factors included interactions with siblings, teachers, and classmates in and outside of school that were also negative in nature. The ways Sophia made sense of her LD were both internal and external. Sophia's sense-making processes about what it meant to be labeled with LD involved a tension between *the promise of LD* and *the confusion and negative emotionality of LD*. By the promise of LD meant how the label were tied to civil rights, protections, and services such as a individualization within an Individualized Education Program (IEP), while by the confusion and negative emotionality of LD, Sophia was aware of how others and society assumed students and people with LD or disabilities were seen and thought about in a negative light. These negative assumptions left Sophia with internalized disability oppression given her label of LD.

In addition, Sophia also acknowledged that LD, or being in special education, was a positive force which allowed her to get *extra help*, even though inequitable quality within general education classrooms persisted:

Well for me, I think that **special ed** is something that you struggle...but when

you go to *special ed*, the class thing, then you get *more* help, then what you usually do in the other classes, you don't get help sometimes (Sophia 10/14/14).

Sophia did not deny that students with LD and other disabilities have learning struggles, and she alluded to general education's lack of responsiveness to student needs. The bottom line for Sophia was getting help with her learning needs. Sophia's answer to the question, "What does it mean to be a student with LD?"—"I don't know actually" (Sophia 01/20/15)—speaks to the equivocal meanings that LD had for her. Unpacking the multilayered meanings of LD can lead to more nuanced understandings of how structural identities such as LD are taken up or avoided by students inside and outside educational institutions. I argue that this is of paramount significance since students labeled as such have emic and on the ground experiences with LD that the field of LD can benefit from. And in unearthing these emotion discourses and narratives, the field of LD can provide a space for student voice and student LD or disability identity development.

Sophia continued to learn and explore her understanding of LD through her continuous reflection. She narrated:

No, just like to my teachers. Like a lot of people *feel embarrassed* to say something that that they're not *really* good at it and they need *more* help in it and am that person that doesn't like saying to people that am *really* good at this or am not good at this, and they make you *feel bad* at it. And like you don't understand something or for say you're not *really* good at math or reading or something and it makes that person *feel bad*. Like if you say somebody that you *trust* and then they keep spreading the words and all that and they say something *bad* about you that *isn't true* but sometimes it makes you

*really feel bad* (Sophia 10/14/14).

For Sophia, her LD identity was something that could perhaps be a topic of gossip or a threat due to others' perceptions and attitudes toward her because of her disability. Talking to teachers about it was safe, but at the same time, LD was something that she needed to keep under her control or silenced. Sophia spoke of not trusting others with the knowledge of her ability differences due to the negative emotional impact of their response toward her. We see the vulnerability that speaking about LD identity had on Sophia—indeed, a negative consequence of LD.

The aforementioned quote is important because it makes visible the emotional energy that is embedded in Sophia's lived experiences with LD and hence, her understanding of the idea of LD. Intensifiers that index emotional-laden talk were present throughout this brief statement. For instance, she used the intensifier *really* three times, expressed *feeling bad* three times, and *embarrassed* once. *Really* (twice), and *more* (one time) were used in the context of ability differences (e.g., not *really* good at it and they need *more* help in it; *really* good at this or am not good as this). By using intensifiers (i.e., *really* and *more*), Sophia prefaced her statement regarding one's ability differences by acknowledging the vulnerability that many people feel—*embarrassed*—when saying what one is *really* good at and what they need *more* help in—due to the fact that they "*make you feel bad at it.*"

*The multifaceted nature of LD.* For Sophia, LD had more than one meaning. A prominent view of LD was the image of a slow learner. Sophia explained:

Probably like *am slow or something*, I don't know... That other kids can learn it *really* fast, like for say a math problem they can learn it *really* fast and if I have a learning disability, I can't learn it *that* fast, I have to learn it *really slow* (Sophia

10/14/14).

Sophia's words point to a problematic logic widely documented in the Disability Studies literature. The self-concepts of people with disability are in direct relationship to those who are not labeled disabled (Gill, 1997). Further, Sophia seemed to conflate who she was with the educational label that was given to her: LD. This narrative merger speaks to how classification systems influence the *self-constructions* of those labeled as such. However, *what counts as LD* and how individuals such as *Sophia make sense of LD* and what it has to say about their *sense of self is not a seamless process or a one-to-one correspondence*. In other words, the homology of the LD field—the master narratives of the field, that is, the “pre-existent sociocultural forms of interpretation...[that]...delineate and confine the local interpretation strategies and agency constellations in individual subjects as well as in social institutions”—is not the paralogy or voice of students per se (Bamberg, 2004, p. 287).

Sophia's statement reified a social hierarchy between disabled and non-disabled people as reflected in her use of intensifiers. She used the intensifier *really* three times to contrast her learning with the learning process of her “abled” peers—that is, other kids learn *really* fast and she learns *really* slow. Sophia also intensified these differences by explaining that she “can't learn it *that* fast” compared to her non-labeled peers. An important insight is that although Sophia viewed LD as defined by slow learning, her experiences also made evident that institutional occasions made her LD identity visible. That is, social contexts played a significant role in making LD a relevant category in a learner's experiences.

## Recommendations

Based on my re-stating of the larger three-year qualitative study's findings we can make the following critical conclusions about the current

status quo as it relates how LD is currently constructed in schools' and society's everyday practices: 1) we need to move beyond the medical-psychological model of disability to foregrounding the psycho-emotional disablement (Thomas, 1999) of students with LD; 2) acknowledge the different ways in which students labeled with LD experience LD at their intersections, 3) and the social construction of LD through LD emotions, both internally and externally, within educational contexts, in and around schools. Lastly, Sophia's experiences illuminate 4) the need for disability identity development that can be facilitated from a liberation psychology (Burton & Kagan, 2009) and Disability Studies (DS) and community psychology approach at resilience (Runswick-Cole & Goodley, 2013).

**Sophia's voice rings loud and clear that we need a praxis that acknowledges difference within the domain of education and foregrounds academic social and emotional justice for all.**

Historically, the meaning of LD is associated with something within the neurology of those labeled as such and hence inside their body, brain, and mind. However, this study's exploration of the ways Sophia experienced LD and the meaning of LD illuminated how LD becomes relevant in moments (McDermott, Raley & Seyer-Ochi, 2009) of social interaction. Given this conclusion, it is imperative to foreground the voices of historically marginalized youth such as Sophia and how she is experiencing the phenomena of LD on the ground. This is critical given Disability Studies in Education's turn towards a Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) framework (Connor, Ferri, & Annamma, 2016) that privileges the voices of those historically marginalized youth with disabilities (DisCrit Tenet 4) at their intersections about the meanings of disability. Within this study, Sophia's voice contributes to the knowledge base about LD that centers disability at its intersections (DisCrit 2) of historically

marginalized youth and their families. Lastly, Sophia's LD emotion-laden talk about being labeled with LD and her understanding of the idea of LD illuminates the psychological impacts of ableism at her intersections (DisCrit 3) that unfortunately reinforced the hegemony of normalcy. For example, this was upheld through others' responses to Sophia that reinforced notions of the "average child" or "normal child." These notions do not exist in a cultural vacuum, but are a part of western cultural norms (Connor, Ferri, & Annamma, 2016). Sophia's case illuminates how she navigated schooling and learning contexts, internally and externally. Historically, special education has been good at finding, locating and diagnosing children with deficits; however, it has failed to account for disability identity development. I argue here and within the larger dissertation study that this can be facilitated with a liberation psychology and DS and community psychology approach at resilience. Understanding the structures of ableism within U.S. society and school systems can help fight the culture of silence (Gibson, 2006) that exists at the intersections of ethnicity, race, and disability. Sophia's participation in the study allowed her and I to enter into a discursive and narrative third and hybrid space where she was able to grapple with the meaning of being labeled with LD and the idea of LD. By third space, I mean the narrative or the discursive itself is that space that is created during the interview process. The narrative is physical, metaphorical, temporal, historical, spiritual, emotional and meta-reflective space through emotion-laden talk. In particular, this space allowed her to voice and express her feelings about it and release some of the negative emotionality that was surrounding her experiences in school related to LD. In other words, Sophia read her social and emotional world of LD and developed her *conscientization* (tenet 1 of liberation psychology; Burton & Kagan, 2009; Freire, 2000) as a form of resistance to the hegemony of smartness and disability micro-aggressions.

The emotional and social lives of historically

marginalized youth with LD at their intersections are of grave importance. This is vital for not only individual development but for changes within educational systems and society. There has



*Attribution: [Graphic of white cubes of various heights with the word "status quo" on them. Centered is a red sphere with the word "disrupt!" on it.]*

been a curtailing of the civil rights protections of not only students with dis/abilities, but other historically marginalized youth such as LGBTQIA, undocumented, and from Black and Brown groups, as demonstrated by the attack on affirmative action in higher education in the U.S. The xenophobia, identity politics and socio-cultural historical contexts of different groups within U.S. society and institutions demands a more robust praxis with students at their intersectional identities. We can no longer ignore how academic, social and emotional dimensions are integral to students' experiences with LD, like Sophia's, at the intersections of power and identity.

Education is a human right. We must account for the cognitive, emotional and social contexts of children with disabilities, in the traditional sense of doing special education and schooling. This is important for a critical emotion revolutionary praxis—critical thinking and feeling before acting—for liberation and well-being. This praxis

will include an acknowledgment by those in power of the mechanisms of violence—along with ableism, racism, and other forms of intersectional oppression. Sophia spoke to such violence, both individual and structural, but also to the politics of hope that can be generative for new praxis on the ground with not only Sophia, but all those marginalized by the system. In other words, Sophia’s voice rings loud and clear that we need a praxis that acknowledges difference within the domain of education and foregrounds academic, social and emotional justice for all.



*Attribution: [Photo of an elementary-aged girl of Color, standing against a brick wall, smiling. She has her hands in front of her face with her fingers in the shape of a heart.]*

### About the Author

**Dr. Hernández-Saca** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Special Education at the University of Northern Iowa. He received his PhD from Arizona State University and MA from UC Berkeley. Dr. Hernández-Saca is a former multi-subject teacher and his teaching responsibilities at UNI include undergraduate teacher preparation courses in the areas of post-school transition programming and issues and applications in special education. Dr. Hernández-Saca's two areas of research are: (1) the emotional impact of LD labeling on conceptions of self and (2) the role of emotion and affect in teacher learning about social justice issues. He investigates this as it relates to historical equity issues in special education and current movements for inclusive education. He has published in journals such as *Learning Disability Quarterly* and the *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, and has presented at numerous national and regional conferences.

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## **About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center**

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequity.org>.

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