TALK LD Podcast 1: Transcript

Podcast disclaimer

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Lawrence: Welcome to TALK LD, a podcast of LD at school. Our aim is to engage you our audience in a lively conversation, aimed at educators, as we talk to educators, about the issues facing LD students in our classroom.

I'm your host Lawrence Barns, join me as we talk LD.

Welcome to our first ever edition of TALK LD. I'm delighted to have a panel of experts here with me in the studio to talk to you about the issues facing our students in the classroom. They're all giggling at this point, it's good. Around the table with me tonight I have Susan Paterson who is a teacher with the Peel District School Board, Doctor Todd Cunningham who is a school and clinical psychologist, he teaches at the University of Toronto, and is very versed in working with students and their families in all sorts of learning difficulties. And finally, last but not least, Julia Osborne, who is a SERT with the York Regional School Board. Welcome folks and thank you very much for being part of this podcast.

Todd: You're very welcome.

Susan: Thank you.

Julia: Thank you.

Lawrence: There we go. So one of the things we are going to do first, is we went actually on the road to listen to the voice of the student. So I met a young lady, Elisa, on location, out in our York Regional offices, and she's at York University now but we spent some time talking about her school years, and we are going to listen to that tape right now.

Lawrence: Elisa welcome to Talk LD. I know you're a university student now, but today I'm going to ask you to look back on your classroom years, and talk a bit about the challenges you faced in the classroom, and then later on we will talk about how a teacher can influence the student and their learning environment. But let's talk about, what was the broadest challenge you faced in the classroom growing up?

Elisa: One of the biggest challenges was more the social aspect of being in the classroom. So, I grew up in a very small elementary school, so once you're labelled as the stupid kid, you are the stupid kid. From

kindergarten to grade 8, it doesn't matter. So it was a constant battle to try to prove to other students that I was smart enough or I had a right to be in the classroom, right? So there was little embarrassing things, like you know, after O Canada I had to leave the classroom to go out to the "special room", right? Or I would get a cheat sheet, is what they would call it, for exams in front of everyone. And it was really a battle with myself, believing that I was stupid. Or that these were just cheats teachers were giving me in order to get me through their grade, right? So the broadest challenge, and I wouldn't even say, I mean, I know we're staying with elementary school and high school, but it's a challenge throughout my whole life. It's the social aspect, right? So, you don't grow out of your LD. It's with you forever, and in different environments like the classroom environment, the workforce, wherever I go, I'm always surrounded by somebody who doesn't understand an LD. And especially in elementary school that was huge, because I mean, we know that children can be the cruellest when it comes to something they don't understand. So it's a constant process for me, and that's why it's the most broadest difficulty I have, is trying to constantly prove to other people that I am not less than, and I belong in an academic setting just like them.

Lawrence: Right, now in the early years, you said yourself children can be cruel and we know that –

Elisa: yeah-

Lawrence: But I also noticed that you used the stupid word, a word we tend to avoid, but that's the kind of words kids throw around.

Elisa: Yeah, definitely.

Lawrence: So, how long did it take you in the classroom environment, to kind of start to recognize that an LD is a different way of learning, but it's not in any way a reflection of your intellect.

Elisa: Right, it took me an extremely long time. And it was a huge emotional battle.

Lawrence: Right.

Elisa: So you know you would come up the hill so to speak, you hear your parents say stuff like, you know, you're just as smart as everyone else, you just do it in a different way. And then you would get to school and you would have your friends reading a novel while you're still reading a picture book. It's almost like a knock to your self-esteem or a slap to the face. And then you had those amazing teachers too who would pull you aside and help you out, and then you would have those not so great teachers, who when you were resisting, because you were embarrassed, they actually just let you be. And that was the worst thing. Even though I looked like I wasn't ready to learn, I was crying out to actually have somebody show me the right way.

Lawrence: Right, so what your saying is that resistance, which was really a result of the peer pressure you were feeling in the classroom, could be misinterpreted sometimes by the teacher.

Elisa: Exactly, so like one of my coping mechanisms, I think it was around grade 6, was to be the jokester of the class. So I would be constantly taking attention away from everybody else and just making jokes.

And that was really great for making friends, and it was really great for people not noticing that I had difficulty reading, or couldn't add or anything like that, but really it took away from my learning process all together. And that's a common thing that most LD students really do, be the jokester or be difficult in the class.

Lawrence: So these behaviours, because I think what I am hearing, and I don't want to put words in your mouth, is that the social pressure became the biggest challenge you faced, and then that exhibits itself in behaviour from you as a student. So one of the things I think your saying is that teachers need to understand that the peer pressure in the classroom often will lead to the student behaviour being a little out of the norm, because they are so worried about not fitting in with their peers.

Elisa: Yeah exactly. We all think about when we were younger the number one thing you wanted was to fit in, I mean school was not our priority. It was to fit in, like I talk about back in high school. My friends biggest concern when going on a date was what to wear, what to say, what are the flirty things you could do. Whereas for me, the biggest concern for going on a date was would I be able to read the menu. And that is so huge, it tells a lot. The fact that I had no one to talk to about my LD. My friends had that common ground, and when you came into the classroom, you constantly felt excluded, less than, that you didn't actually belong there. That you had no one to talk to. So from a teachers perspective, I mean you have to almost realize that there is a lot of layers going on with these kids, that you don't even see. All you see is the behaviour, which is almost a symptom of an LD. The behaviour is acting out in class and being a clown, but there is all these layers going on with these students trying to cope with an LD. Trying to fit in, and it gets very deep.

Lawrence: Yeah, and for some kids, I know for other kids I've spoken too, you're talking about the joker. For others they will engage in sports and that's a place they become accepted, and it helps their classroom environment. So let's talk a little bit, Elisa, about a teacher that was really good and sticks out in your mind as being a teacher that really helped you to move on within the system. What did they do differently? You don't need to name names but I'm interested in, for our audience of teachers is, what did that educator do? How did they reach you? Let's say you're in that class clown mode, what did they do to reach past the behaviour and bring the learning more forward in your own behaviour?

Elisa: Right. Those teachers stand out the most for me because I don't even think they realized what an impact they had on me. So, in elementary school I think it was around grade 5-6, I started getting more mainstream, so I wasn't taken out of the classroom, I was put into the classroom doing the class work, but I would have a variation or I had an EA behind me and it was my first day in the classroom. And it wasn't like an easy transition. Everyone knew that Elisa was back in the classroom, very small classes 10-15 people. And I had a teacher and he was absolutely amazing. Instead of just pretending that this was just a regular day, and being very casual about it. He said 'I would like to welcome Elisa, she's going to be in our classroom more often today', and then he goes on to talk about that he used to have a lisp growing up. And that his friends used to make fun of that lisp. And the whole process, he made it funny, he made it exciting, but he also showed that there are different type of learners, or that everyone has their own process or their own difficulties. And it made me so happy that he did that. Because a lot of times what teachers do do, is they don't pay attention to a learning disability. They want to tell you

you're the same as everyone else and that's okay. What that teacher did, in a sense, was he celebrated the learning disability. Or the disability just in general. He brought attention to it and then showed how we all have our difficulties and also how that difficulty could be a strength. He told some great stories about that. And that, he has no idea how much that helped me out to feel more comfortable in the classroom. Maybe the other students didn't get it, but for me that was amazing. I also have to talk about another teacher. My verbal skills, my verbal comprehension skills, are in the gifted range. I've always been able, even when I was a younger kid, I was always 'talk talk talking' before I was even walking. But, in elementary school I was very, almost, shy about my strengths. I didn't think I had any strengths. And we had the speech competition, in a lot of elementary schools they do this, everybody in the class would read a speech and then you get to go to the gym and you can come in first place. I wrote a speech about my trip to PEI with my family, and it was hilarious, but I knew that I was the LD kid, I wasn't going to make it, but I have really good verbal skills. So I get in front of the class and I kill it, I am amazing at this speech, and comes around time for everybody to vote, and you know my friends come up to me and some other students and they say to me, 'Elisa you were really great but we are going to vote for so and so.' Because how could the LD kid make it to the gym? How could the kid who's been leaving the classroom all the time be voted for? It didn't make sense to them. So no one really voted for me. But that night we got a call from my teacher around dinner time, and she said that I made it and that I'm going to be going on to semifinals and all that stuff. And I was ecstatic, I thought 'oh my gosh maybe they did vote for me' or whatever. But what she actually did was she saw potential in me, and she saw that the voting was not going fairly because of the politics of the classroom, and she gave me that opportunity. I ended up making it to the gym and making it to second place. My first time. And it gave me a win, and what I talk about a lot is LD kids never get a win. We are constantly spelling a word wrong, adding wrong, you know going in the wrong direction when driving. We never have a win. And just to have the opportunity to say 'wow, I'm really good at something' and that teacher, that adult, was able to see that in me. Made a world of difference. I mean I don't know how ethical it is to kind of swing the vote but -

Lawrence: You know what, I think the reality in those competitions is that, if the prize is meant to be for the best speech, then maybe the teacher was going 'yeah this voting by the classroom thing is an impediment to it'. But I think I'm hearing, and I'm always interested in takeaways for our audience, is what you said about helping an LD student as a teacher to get some wins, and the impact that can make on them as a student. Some students are great at sports, so if they are a jock at high school they can get some of those wins. But for some students, like you said, they are almost in that constant struggle, and never win in the classroom, they never Mr. or Miss popular in the classroom. And this story is a great one for, I think, all educators to say 'those kids can win' and you've got to find out how to help them.

Elisa: Yes! Exactly.

Lawrence: Okay good.

Lawrence: So welcome back to the TALK LD studio. I am here with my expert panel. Susan Paterson, Dr. Todd Cunningham, and Julia Osborne. So folks, we've heard Elisa's story, and I want to recognize upfront it's her individual story. So it's not necessarily atypical. As you've heard she is quite the advocate, she

does a lot of work with the Learning Disabilities Association York Region, as an ambassador because she's very eloquent and very willing to speak her mind. So I'm going to start off by just asking your initial reactions to her experience, and how typical or not you feel that may be in the school system. Julia would you like to kick us off?

Julia: Sure, I felt that its very typical what Elisa said of how students do feel. What resonated with me was her comment about behaviour as a symptom of an LD, and we do deal, at my school specifically, with a lot of students who do have behavioural concerns. And teachers often judge them and think that they are bad kids, when really it's because they do have a learning disability, and that is their coping mechanism. And they're trying to hide that they are struggling.

Lawrence: Okay, interesting. Todd?

Todd: I was surprised by the fact that virtually the first thing that comes out of her mouth is the stupid word. You know you ask her about her experience of having a learning disability and the first place she goes is ' I feel stupid.' And I find that that is such a common thing that we see among many of the children who have learning disabilities, is this inherent set of what we call 'low academic self-concept'. 'I view myself as a poor student,' and I think that really develops, that sense of stupidity, from an early age when they are constantly getting feedback day in and day out from school that they are not good students. Their marks reflect that, other students tease them about their challenges and in many cases a learning disability is a socially constructed thing. We have decided that there are certain skills that one must master to do well in academics and unfortunately for some individuals those skills don't come as naturally. And unfortunately that leads to this low academic self-concept that turns into this feeling of stupidity.

Lawrence: Yeah it's interesting, as a parent where my boy was diagnosed in grade 4, and now I had the knowledge of an LD. The first thing he said to me was 'Dad it's so good to know that I'm not dumb.' First words out of his mouth. It was an amazing moment. Susan, your reaction?

Susan: Thank you. I agree with what Julia and Todd said as well. And I was really struck by Elisa, that her paramount concerns weren't about the material she was studying, but about how she was perceived in the class, about her anxiety, about how all these issues not pertaining to actually the material and being able to master the material. So I really hear what Todd is saying about the stupid word coming out, and even among adults who work with children sometimes there are misconceptions about what a learning disability or what a learning difference really means.

Lawrence: And it's interesting as well because as a parent, and I got this from Elisa very strongly, my boy was given a laptop as one of his accommodations, but he never would use it in class. Because he didn't want to be the only kid opening a laptop in the middle of that lesson. Is that common amongst your students?

Todd: I see that all the time, I call it the assisted technology, or the laptop is a new flag of stupidity. Again these children have such a low academic self-concept, that anything that brings additional attention to them, an accommodation, the laptop, anything, it suddenly to them intrinsically feels like -

they feel stupid. And what's interesting is in one study that I did, that's not published unfortunately, is we surveyed the LD kids who had the laptop and then the non-LD kids, and the non-LD kids all thought 'hey kids who use laptops in the schools, then they must be smart because that's pretty cool stuff' and then you survey the LD kids and they are the ones 'if anybody using a laptop in school then they have to be stupid, because only stupid kids use laptops.' And so it's a really intrinsically motivated or driven feeling, that again I think early on its planted there.

Lawrence: So, and to Susan's point, it's very clear with Elisa that it was a big issue for her. So let's turn this around a little bit from a teachers perspective now, and look at what can the teacher be doing in the classroom. Because, we all know, resources aren't always there, teachers- you know the old days off the EA's being in every class and those things - they're kind of behind us. But, how can a teacher help with that peer pressure? Susan?

Susan: I think that the principles of universal design really apply here. If the teacher can indicate that this child wears glasses, she gets what she needs to be here and function here. This child there is a wheel chair ramp that makes it possible – that he is able to go to class. So and so has an FM system or uses a hearing aid. Or has a cochlear implant. And with all respect to a child's privacy, but LD kids, they get what they need as well. And that's just such an important part of our society and what we hold to be true. Another feature of that that I think is really important is for all students to realize that any sort of resources in addition to what's sort of typical, they're an investment. And it's not a charitable gift, when people get what they need to be successful in school, that's an investment in that child. I've had a lot of kids over the years where a light bulb goes off because they go 'oh I'm getting all these resources in addition to a typical experience, so that I can do well in school. So that I can go on to meaningful work. So that I can pay taxes for 30 years.' And it's really neat when you see, adolescences for instance, get this light bulb of like 'oh this is what's going on here.' That's a bit extreme, but the idea being that we are making investment in these young people.

Lawrence: I think any teacher that can make an adolescent excited about paying taxes is a teacher that I want to be in their classroom! Julia, your thoughts?

Julia: In terms of learning disability, I always talk about, with my students, the fact that it's an invisible disability, and it's very frustrating for them because it's, you know, they say well if I was in the community class and I had down syndrome then you know, they could see that. They can see that something is wrong with me essentially. But with learning disabilities it is invisible. So at my school and within York Region we do a lot of work on self-advocacy. So we've implemented advocacy cards for students where we are trying to teach them to identify their strengths specifically. Because we want to leverage that in the classroom. And teach to the strengths as well as their areas of need. And then on the back side of their advocacy card that they carry around with them, it's all the strategies that they need their teachers to put in place for them. So it's kind of like their IEP reflected in the advocacy card. And it bridges that gap with teachers. Because we know that with their SERTs they do feel more comfortable. They do feel safer, and so we are doing a lot of work in that regard, of trying to allow them to communicate with the staff members who they are a little more scared off. It's with the other students who they deem as normal, as opposed to themselves who they don't think they are normal.

Lawrence: Advocacy is an interesting question. I noticed that it was, for me it was a tightrope walk between how much of this do I let my son do, and how much of it do I do. And you know, I kind of drew the obvious line in the sand, that went 'well once he goes to high school I'll let more of the advocacy flow his way'. My experience with my boy, the reality was it didn't really happen till the start of grade 11. The first two years of high school he was so busy finding his footing. So let's just talk about advocacy, and what do parents do, and how do teachers help parents to understand the need, because we know in the long term the child needs to develop those skills. Todd?

Todd: Well I think when we look at the models around how self-advocacy develop, the first area is acceptance. And I think for a lot of children who have learning disabilities, there is not an acceptance early on. Because they haven't actually had a good education on what it means. They don't know that you have to have at least average to above average intelligence to qualify for an LD. They don't know, what is their learning profile and what are their areas of strengths and challenges. And how does that then impact their day to day. And that there are things that they're really good at. Those strengths, because I think often, they don't see those strengths on a day to day basis. So we have to first help them, understand what the learning disability is, and the second thing is they have to actually experience success in the classroom. A child's not going to self-advocate, and say 'hey, I need that' unless they actually find that it's useful. They have to have that experience first, and have those. And to do that you need a good teacher, a good parent, someone in there to allow and help facilitate those actions. And then once that starts to happen, once they are able to start to see and experience that, then you know your modeling how to advocate and talk to individuals about it. You start to role play that, allow them to then try it on their own, and providing them with feedback, and then finally after a bit they just start to do it on their own.

Lawrence: Julia?

Julia: That's funny, because a lot of that resonated with me. At our school we take our students through their Psycho-educational Assessment, we take our students through IEPs, they actually help us write them. So that it's the student voice reflected in that. Because when we give them the brown envelope with the IEP in it's like a mystery, and it's scary for them. And often they will come into the student support centre, for example, and they will have no idea why they are there. So we want to make sure they understand that they do have strengths. And that we need to use those strengths to help them.

Lawrence: Susan?

Susan: I think that something that can help is students to sort of observe, either in real life like real life role models of young people with LDs who are being successful. There are tons of websites, really reliable websites, the EL centre, for dyslexia and creativity or creativity and dyslexia. Sally Shaywhitz Centre, has all these video clips of young people who, they acknowledge that they have a learning disability, or learning difference, and this is what's worked for them. And it's very encouraging for young people, they hear it from caring teachers, their loving parents, but to be 13 and be in the room with a 17 year old who says 'yeah I've got an IEP, I know it, I helped to write it, this is what it does for me, this is how I cope, these are some of my strengths' and so on.

Lawrence: Yeah absolutely, and as I said Elisa plays an ambassador role for us in York. Interestingly, we have another young lady who is on our board in Sudbury, and when she went to Laurentian University, she wanted to talk to her class about her LD. She'd become that confident. Nine other students disclosed their LD for the first time ever in their university career at that event. So I think you are right Susan, in that you know, they just need a voice that's their generation that can help them through. The other thing that was very clear in Elisa, and now I'm really interested, because I think this is where teachers can really help. Todd, you talked about this, just systemic failure that a child's dealing with at the start at their academic career. If I have any regrets as a parent, before I knew my son knew had an LD, my other two by the way were both flying, both gifted. So, the reality was, we had these battles in the house, I didn't understand his struggle, now I look back with regret. How does the teacher help a student start to get that win. And I want to push to one side, I'm going to be very specific, I'm going to push sports to one side, because a lot of time, with a lot of LD kids in my own circle, I see sports as the out, let's put that to one side and talk about academic wins for a student with an LD, and how we can maybe help those to happen. Susan?

Susan: Sure. I think, everybody wakes up in the morning and wants an engaging day. There is not a child that wakes up- there's a book, the 'Myth of Laziness', building on that and finding out what students are interested in, and also introducing them to the highlights. And often it's to hook them so for instance, invariably students in grade 7 love this historical fiction novel about the war of 1812. And its curricular, but it's a very, very compelling narrative. And 'please read more, can we read it at home?'. And then the projects that go with it. So, understanding developmentally where they are at and what might appear to them. Being open to sort of 'wow hey, never thought of that project lets go with it,' being prepared to do the heavy lifting of going through the material, and you know it's very much an art and less of a science. And it is very taxing on teachers. I do want to add that a classroom teacher has so many, many responsibilities, and it's a wonderful, wonderful job, but I would want to acknowledge the workload and sometimes teachers are overwhelmed. There definitely needs to be a very supportive environment for teachers to be able to say, 'I have this student that has been diagnosed with an LD, I don't even have special Ed part 1, help'. So I think to have these SERTs, and I think that's really, really important from a classroom perspective.

Lawrence: Yeah, and what a great segue to an advertisement for those of you listening, if you are looking for resources in your classroom: www.LDatSchool.ca, is our new service where this podcast is, you should have found it there. There are a plethora and a growing number of resources to help you in the classroom with these kids, so I would encourage you to go there and look. Julia?

Julia: I know for my students in terms of getting the win, is trying to access the curriculum at grade level for them. They don't want to come to class, they don't want you to dumb down the information or the literature for example, so I had all my students- I do believe working them at grade level and finding ways to get there and if that means going backwards to go forwards, then we do that. Because for self-esteem they do need that. But I had all my students reading at grade level, a text, a piece of literature from Eric Walters, and we had them on the iPads. And so it could read it to them, it could define words for them, they could make notes in it, and they were absolutely thrilled and they went and bragged to

their other classmates, and the “normal classroom” that they were reading something that the other class was reading. So finding that opportunity to make sure that they are at grade level.

Lawrence: There you go.

Todd: Yeah, personally I don’t think a student should feel failure coming into school, because we should be able early on, through using curriculum line measures and that, to be able to do early screening procedures to identify where academic challenges are going to be, immediately honing onto those, and providing the necessary remediation. Or, provide the accommodations, the work-arounds so that they are able to continue to do the work that all students are doing in the classroom. And I think if we do that right from the beginning, we start to alleviate those frustrations then you don’t need to have these big wins, because school is a win. Because I don’t feel frustrated coming to school. We know frustration leads to development of anxiety, so if I can stop that frustration early then I don’t get anxious about being at school and then schools a nice place to be. And I’m doing the same thing everybody else is doing.

Susan: I totally agree, I think an issue happening in schools, and there is no other way around it, is an expectation that particularly young students be good generalists. And they are not old enough to specialize, in grade three they can’t say ‘well turns out math is not my thing’, we have the expectations of certain curriculum to be covered by certain benchmark ages and so on. But I think for kids to realize that we have this expectation that everybody be good generalists, and some people go on to be adults who are good generalists, but some people go on to really have superior talents in certain niche areas, and who knows where you are going to be. So the idea that students can start having experiences in a building called school, that are maybe aligned to their interests or, maybe even forecast some later areas of speciality that turn out to be they’re really successful in those areas. Self-knowledge and knowledge that sort of this too will pass, this is actually a brief time in your life, although it seems like its forever.

Lawrence: Yeah not when you are in the middle of it!

Todd: And I think the other big thing, you know, is that, again, early on we are very focused, the Ontario curriculum specifically, is very focused on literacy and numeracy. To the exclusion of drama, and music, and all these other things that just make life so fulfilling and rich. So I think, you know, in some cases when that can’t necessarily happen every day in the classroom, because of all the other things that need to happen, it’s also important for parents to be exploring all those things. If one thing doesn’t work then do the next thing. Go from karate to drama to music, to sports. To something else. Find the thing where that child does have some success or they have an interest. And I think that’s really important especially for parents to really find, and I call it the ‘parents bragging rights.’ Every parent needs something to be able to brag about their child on. And if it takes a couple years to figure out what that specific bragging right is then that’s okay! But find it. Find the thing that you can brag about to your friends.

Lawrence: Let’s talk a little bit about the accommodations, because one of the things that, again I found as a parent, and again this isn’t a blatant statement about teachers, so I’m going to put the caveat up, but every LD is a little bit different. Every student reacts a little bit differently. So one of the things- in

fact I was talking to another teacher not long ago who said, 'if I just hear anyone else say just use dragon then I'm going to pull my hair out.' Because it kind of - and by the way I'm that parent, go buy dragon, never worked, was actually more of a bind then it was a help. And I'm not knocking the product, for some students it works extremely well. (32:12)

Todd: About two percent.

Lawrence: But it's very difficult for a teacher, you know, 25-30 kids whatever the number is, now maybe I've got half a dozen kids with an LD, they're all that slight bit different- to your point Susan, this is a tough and delicate balance to try and be able to give those kids what they need, without falling back on 'here's my stock and staple, let's use this accommodation.' How do you as a teacher, work with all of those students whilst not, universal design is going to be part of your answer, but there is a big classroom there to deal with, and I'm just not sure how you always balance it out. How we fairly help teachers to deal with that responsibility. Thoughts?

Todd: Well, I think when it comes to accommodations, you don't necessarily- there are some general accommodations that work for a large number of students, and so when we start to break down a task into what's going to get in the way of a group of students, then we can really tailor our accommodations. Let's say a grade 10 teacher, teaching geography and giving a test, well if I know that there is a group of students who can't read, then immediately I go 'well let's have them do it orally,' or we'll read the questions to them and they can dictate the answers back. If I know that a student has a real memory weakness, a core memory weakness, especially for auditory memory where they can't really remember names and dates, then maybe that's kind of some stuff that I'm going to provide on the reference sheet for them because again, I'm not necessarily wanting to measure that, I want to measure how are they able to synthesize and pull together the concepts that we've been learning in school, or in class, and be able to demonstrate that. So I think a really important thing is just to take the task, break it down, identify what are the specific things that might get in the way, and then look at your students in front of you – and you'll be able to say quickly, well on this test this group of student are going to need to do it orally, these group of students are going to need a reference sheet and those ones might need some extra time because they just get distracted. And suddenly you don't have to be doing 25 different accommodations; you can break them down into a manageable number of accommodations that is going to make a huge impact on those individual students.

Lawrence: Yeah, and sometimes they're simple by the way, with my boy, just make sure he is sitting at the front of the class. Like seriously that was it, if he knew he was at the front of the class and the teachers eyes were on him, he's now 80% better than if he was anywhere out of sight. It's just the way it works.

Julia: We always say accommodations are just good teaching practice really, so like Todd said, think about what you want them to accomplish at the end of it all, and then work backwards. And you know, it's getting to know your students as well, and in a large class, taking that time to greet them outside, see what kind of day they are having, especially for students with ADHD or behavioural issues that coincide with the learning disability. It's making sure you know what kind of day they are having,

because the accommodations that you have set out may work, but you might have to put more in place in terms of more check ins, in terms of more functional movement, going for a break, going for a drink. So I'm a strong believer in having those relationships with the students, and then also really working with them so that they trust you. So that they can also say to you, 'I need some help on this,' and be able to advocate for themselves. I keep going back to the advocacy, that's a big piece for us.

Lawrence: But its huge right, if you – you know, when I can get through the point of him raising his hand in class to say 'I don't get this or I didn't understand what you just said', then he flew. And in high school for him, like most high school kids it's a little different, because once you get to high school there is a resource room, and that certainly for a lot of kids is a safe environment, there is other kids like them in there, the teachers are a little more specialist, so they can talk to them. And the teachers can run interference. Which is the other issues as well, we had certain teachers that my other two kids were under, the resource teacher said 'your boy can't have this teacher' not because they're a bad teacher, but their style won't suit him. So they helped to put him in the right science class, and the right English class for him and that's the issue. Susan were you going to add something? No?

Todd: I just want to make a point here but I look at Elisa and probably your child as well, they're part of the atypical LD individual because when we look at the 2007 research LDA Canada did, they surveyed across Canada looking at LD individuals vs. typical individuals, then what we found is around grade 10 LD students are dropping out of school, at high rates. They're not going on to post-secondary education, college or university. Only about 8% of students go onwards whereas about 64% of the regular population goes on. So there is something that is happening to a lot of these other individuals that they are unable to develop those advocacy skills, those accommodations aren't happening in their classroom to allow them to have those successes and those wins, and so therefore they are taking a very different trajectory than Elisa did. And I think that it's really important that we step back and really look at that and try to understand those individuals as well, because those are really the individuals that we are going to be seeing in our classroom when it comes to LD kids.

Lawrence: Yeah, I agree Todd, and I think that's a very important point. Because I think what Elisa actually talked to, but in her case worked through it, was behavioural issues that she used to mask her LD in the classroom, and I think to this group you're talking about, those are the kids that are in the smoking circle, they've decided to act up, and quickly almost gain that reputation of the "no hope kid" and where does that end up in the education system unfortunately.

Todd: They're smart kids! And what they're doing is they're using their behaviours, their intelligence to develop behaviours that allow them to cope in a very frustrating, and anxiety provoking situation. 'Hey, if I act up in class what happens? I get sent out of the classroom. And now I don't have to worry about the fact that I can't read, because I don't have to read at all in front of my friends.' So it makes a lot of sense, they develop these behaviours, it's our jobs I think as educators and psychologists and parents, is to step back and go 'okay, again, so here's these behaviours – what is that underlying symptom?' And treat it, and really go at the symptoms of what's leading to that behaviour cycles. So that goes back to what others were saying around the table.

Lawrence: Yeah, and it's interesting because you say Elisa and maybe my boy who did graduate high school, now in this void of what he's going to do next, but that's a whole different discussion. But, let's ask the question, you three are of more linked to it then I am, are we getting better at this stuff Todd? Are we improving? What's our report card look like on these students and us in the educational system at this point?

Todd: Well the best data we have is the 2007 data that looked across Canada. I think one of the really awesome things that have happened in the last 15-20 years is that the research has really come to a point where we really understand how do we teach literacy and how do we teach numeracy. And especially for those kind of 5%, those really tough group of our population that really don't respond to normal types of teaching of literacy and that. We know what to do to go in and remediate. Stuff like Empower is fantastic. And we can make huge gains within 120 hours of instruction. So we have the knowledge at this point, so that's awesome. We also have a really great world of technology that's coming about that's augmenting a lot of the accommodations that we are able to provide, but I think where we are in education is we are still at the point of trying to understand how do we take this awesome evidence-based knowledge and really integrate it into the day to day practices within the classroom, so that we are catching students early, or that we are providing them with the right types of accommodations and assistive technology to reduce those areas of frustration as they are entering into high school. I think we are still at a learning point there, kind of a transition point of moving this evidence-based knowledge into a practical knowledge, that all teachers have access to.

Lawrence: Susan?

Susan: It's a great question, and great points. We don't have, we still have the same school days, six hours or so and always increasing expectations about what can be accomplished in that time. My own experience, I'm very, very immersed in the LD world, being seconded to the LD school, through the provincial school branch, and then teaching in a self-contained LD setting for 10 years, so I feel somewhat disconnected to how are we doing in the mainstream. Working one child at a time, it's very inspiring when students light up in terms of 'oh wow, I'm not alone.' When they understand that this is very almost like characteristic to have, and demystifying different learning profiles I think is really, really powerful for kids. Not to at all diminish the significance of their individual profile, but to see themselves in the context of the width and breadth of humanity is really important. But I would hope that knowledge about learning disabilities or learning differences among the teaching populations is ever improving.

Lawrence: Absolutely. Julia?

Julia: I was going to say exactly that Susan, that I think it really comes down to educating staff. And every staff, like admin, support staff, EAs, CYWs, about what a learning disability means. Because sometimes the stigma comes from staff members, where they look at a student and think 'they're stupid', well that's their view. And if that's their view then you can surely believe that those students know that. I mean with my students they know the staff members who don't support them, and who don't believe in them. And they get really down on themselves and they allow those kind of projections from the staff

members to make them feel badly about themselves when we've made so many gains. So I think educating our staff and making sure they understand average to above average intelligence, you have to be really smart to have a learning disability.

Lawrence: There you go. Okay, it's been very lively, one last question for all three of you. For a teacher listening today, I'm going to ask each of you, if you had one piece of wisdom around students that are living with an LD in the classroom that you could pass onto them. They're all looking at the ceiling now folks. Who would like to go first in giving me that little nugget to end the podcast on?

Todd: I think, you know, in this day and age LD or any other learning challenges, or even for typical or gifted children, I think as an educator I would hope that teachers understand that they have the most amazing job out there; you have the ability to influence children's lives on a day to day basis. And I look at Elisa, and she talks about two teachers that just stand out as these remarkable individuals that really probably changed her views, or changed the way she was experiencing school, and to be able to do that, and each day have 30 students or so in your class where you can begin to do that with, I think is a remarkable gift. So I think we need to be very creative in the way that we go about looking at these things. We need to be kind of researchers within our own classes, be willing to try new things if something's not working, but really get down to the point of really seeing these as individuals who we want to succeed.

Susan: I really appreciated Elisa using the term common ground. Finding common ground, her teacher did that when he described his experience of having a lisp, and she talked quite a bit about that in terms of connecting with other kids and what she's doing in her advocacy work, finding common ground. And to me, it really comes down to that, to encourage teachers to realize that they share common ground with their students, with the parents, with administration in the school, in terms of accessing resources and getting training and so on. To find that common ground and to really help their students realize that they can have these good experiences in a place called school. I find it very encouraging.

Julia: My whole little takeaway would be to believe in your students and to set the bar high. I'm a true believer in show your students that you believe in their abilities and setting that bar high, because if you set it high, they will achieve it. They do not want you to set the bar low. They don't want you to dumb things down, they are smart and if you give them the knowledge behind their LD, and about their strengths and areas of weakness then they are going to use it. You set that bar high and push them to be their very best.

Lawrence: Wow, we've covered a lot of ground tonight folks. I want to thank you, Julia Osborne, Susan Paterson, Dr. Todd Cunningham, thank you for your expertise and your time. We are also grateful to Elisa for being so open and frank and helping us to have a kickoff point for this discussion. I'm your host Lawrence Barns, until next time on TALK LD, I wish you a good night.