The Journey to Becoming a Self-Advocate: Three Students’ Perspectives

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(Music)

Lawrence – Welcome to TalkLD, a podcast of LD@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.

So for the second part of our podcast of TalkLD today I have some of Jenessa’s students around the table – from left to right here as I look around the table: Ava, Mason, and AJ. Thanks for joining me this afternoon.

Ava – Thank you.

Lawrence – So I’m going to ask each of you, and I’m going to start with AJ, cause he’s...

AJ – Oh no!

Lawrence – I’m afraid so! Tell me a little bit AJ about your own journey into becoming your own advocate and how you first started working with Jenessa. What were you like when you first showed up at high school?

AJ – Okay, well for starters, pretty much just like everyone else; just the mindset of only how many days til we’re out and then...

[Laughs.]

AJ – …we’re free from school. But, I guess, well I’m not going to lie. Just like most kids who start off in, you know, this program, we didn’t really have the perseverance to keep up with our homework. You know, when I go home it’s pretty much like you know, ‘Do you have homework?’ ‘No, you know, it’s alright, I don’t have any.’

Lawrence – I think that’s actually just teenagers.

AJ – You’re right.

[Laughs.]

AJ – Ya, but, ya I was just, I was a slacker. I don’t like asking for help, especially when I was young…er.
Lawrence – And it still doesn’t come easy I take it, right?

AJ – No, it doesn’t come easy, but I’m better at it than I was before, because I guess it was probably just the younger me who didn’t really understand why everything was necessary.

Lawrence – Right.

AJ – You know, why the work that was given to us, it’s like, why do we have to do what, you know, you say that we have to do? I guess, that was more of a rebellion kind of thing, I don’t know.

Lawrence – Ya, that’s fine.

AJ – You know, like it’s a teenager thing.

Lawrence – So Mason, what was the first few weeks of grade 9 like for you if you can cast your mind back?

Mason – Grade 9?

Lawrence – Just coming into high school.

Mason – Well, it was okay because I had friends and stuff, and school was okay, but I still had problems with finishing work and stuff.

Lawrence – What about approaching and talking to teachers? How easily did that come to you?

Mason – Ya. It wasn’t easy because, first of all, I wasn’t doing that well in certain classes and the teachers, I mean, not that they didn’t want to help, but you could tell some of them were just a bit, I don’t know, upset, sometimes, you know, just not very approachable.

Lawrence – And that’s part of it for all students with an LD, right, because, again, I’m a parent. My son’s got an LD, so I know that some subjects come easier than others, so sometimes you could be flying in English but maybe math is an issue. So you have to navigate through some relationships with teachers which are great and others that don’t seem as great because that class you need the extra help in.

Ava, tell us about your first few days in high school. What was your experience like?

Ava – High school was actually very scary for me when I started out, I was terrified, especially of teachers and everything and when I started, I was in all applied classes because I was told to go into applied classes because I had a learning disability. That’s what all my middle school teachers said. They were like, ‘We prefer you in applied classes because of your learning disability’ and they kind of used that as an excuse to put me in applied classes, I feel. But, you know, as high school went on, and as I used resource, like as I use GLE and resource like as a resource, I opened up a little bit more and it took a little near the end of ninth grade for me to start being able to approach other teachers and, you know, talk about my problems and everything, but at first it was, I was quiet, I didn’t like anything at all, whatsoever. I was very silent.
Lawrence – And how much of that is that fear of I don’t want to be different from the rest of the people around me in this classroom? I don’t want to tell people I need more help. I don’t want to tell people that I need extra time. Is that part of the fear?

Ava – Ya, definitely, because I just, it’s like, you’re sitting in this classroom and everyone’s around you and they’re all, you know, doing their work and they don’t have extra time for this, and they don’t have that, and you want extra time and you wonder, well, what makes me different? Why am I different? And then, you know, they try and explain it, and they say, maybe because it takes you longer to understand what you’re reading and you might need help understanding it sometimes, but like, as much as I’ll try to understand it myself, you know, it’s just...I don’t know how to explain it. It’s just like it’s different and I don’t like being different.

Lawrence – Mmhmm.

Ava – But, you know, unfortunately, like...

Lawrence – And that’s part of the teenage years.

Ava – Ya.

Lawrence – Teenagers don’t want to to stick out.

Ava – Ya.

Lawrence – I know with my son, one of the things was, you know, assistive technology’s great, but he never wanted to open a laptop and be the only guy in class with a laptop because suddenly everyone’s looking at you. Why are you different? Why has he got a laptop? So, let’s talk a little bit about Jenessa’s role for you guys. AJ, what’s Jenessa done to help you along this path? And if you say nothing by the way, she’s still in the studio, so...

[Laughs.]

Lawrence – I’m just warning you up front!

AJ – Got it.

[Laughs.]

AJ – I’ll try to be very careful with my next few words. But, Miss D, a lot of support; I won’t lie. Even though I’ve only had Miss D since I’m in my final year of high school, and this is my first and only year having her, she’s been very supportful, especially with both the school work or if there’s troubles outside of school. Like, what I love especially is that it doesn’t feel like, it’s not a demand. It’s not like you need to do this. You have to do this. It’s more of like, you know, what can we do so that it’s more comfortable for you to get into this new habit and, you know, get rid of old bad habits? And, I think, especially for teenagers, it’s really important because I guess, you know, like I said before, we’re all trying to figure out who we want to be in life, you know and it’s really important to know that, because
the number one thing that I do is, I make sure that I have a certain relationship with my teachers. Well, appropriate, number one, but that they understand the world that I’m coming from and that they are willing to, not only help me, you know, but change their way, because you know, we all learn differently, right, so...

Lawrence – Absolutely.

AJ – As long as they can find a way that helps the both of us so that I can feel comfortable in my learning space and that they don’t have to feel stressed out because, you know, I don’t want to do any more work.

Lawrence – So it sounds like, to summarize, it sounds like what Miss D, you know, I’ve got the lingo down now. What Miss D has helped you do is find that middle ground between you and the teacher, right? This is a partnership and you’re working together and it’s a give and take. That’s how you described it there, correct?

AJ – Yup.

Lawrence – Okay, good. I think that’s interesting. Mason, interesting for you. Miss D said that, if in need, she would act as your lawyer.

Mason – Can I, like, speak in general about it?

Lawrence – Yes.

Lawrence – Okay, good. I think that’s interesting. Mason, interesting for you. So, Miss D said that, if in need, she would act as your lawyer.

Mason – She’s been my lawyer when it comes to getting out of a jam in tests because sometimes you need to get the proper accommodations to make sure that you can do the test focused and without distractions. She helps me get to where I need to be in terms of like organization with the teachers and stuff like that, so we don’t usually have to have those problems where she has to be my lawyer. So, ya.

Lawrence – So do you go to her sometimes first Mason and talk about, I’ve got this issue with this teacher and this is what I’m thinking of doing and she helps to guide you in a strategy?

Mason – Ya. She does help me with the strategies and work in general.

Lawrence – Okay. Ava – Miss D and you. Tell me about it.

Ava – Miss D and you. Tell me about it.

Ava – I’ve had a lot of resource teachers because I’ve changed schools a lot and I think like definitely she’s been the most helpful. And mostly because she’s so encouraging with everything that we’re doing, you know. Like, if we doing an assignment and we’re worried about it, she’ll read it over with us and she’ll make such nice comments like halfway through. It just builds your confidence with what you’re doing, and she does that with every subject and everything, just everything about the student in general. Like she tries to encourage you so that you do better and I think that’s a huge thing because if
you’re not encouraged and you’re not confident about what you’re doing then you’re not really going to like it. So she’s so encouraging and that’s one of the biggest...I just admire that a lot, but ya.

Lawrence – And how important is it Ava to have that teacher in your life that you just feel completely comfortable with? Because it sounds from all three of you that with Miss D you can completely be honest; you can tell her exactly where you are in your relationships with other teachers; you can tell her exactly where maybe you’ve dropped the ball a little, and she’s going to help you work that through. How important is it to have that teacher to go to in those times of need?

Ava – It’s really important because we have, we’re semestered, so we have four teachers per semester or, you know, depending on if you have spare or not, and having that one teacher that no matter what semester, no matter what class you’re in, that you can go to her and, you know, ask for help, if it’s like with the class itself or with talking to the teacher. She just, she gives you such good advice and support, and that’s important to have. You need that comfort.

Lawrence – Mmhmm.

Ava – Because if you don’t have that, you know, you’re going to show up a lot more, especially students with learning disabilities. It’s just harder.

Lawrence – So let’s talk a bit, guys, about the parents in this position because as a parent, I know letting my guy find his own voice was really tough. How have you guys experienced that? AJ, you taking on your self-advocacy, being your own advocate and taking some of that away from your parents who would’ve done it when you were younger, right – how has that process worked for you?

AJ – Well, the conversation has come up with my parents, for example because you know, being in the last year, when you go into post-secondary it’s different, you know? Mommy and Daddy aren’t going to be there to talk to the teacher for you.

Lawrence – Mmhmm.

AJ – You have to go and take the initiative and do it yourself and, I guess, at first it’s, I mean, with my father it’s, he likes the fact that I’m getting the extra help but he wants to make sure, at the same time, it’s not closing any doors for me, you know? He wants to know that the day will come where I won’t need, you know, the GLE or the extra help and stuff, that I’ll be right up there with the rest of the students, you know? That if the test is only an hour, that I don’t need the extra thirty minutes, you know, because I’m up to speed with the rest of the class. With my mom, it’s like, you know, she wants to make sure that whenever I need it, I need it, you know? If I need help, I need help. But at the same time, don’t be too dependent on it. So, I guess, for my parents, it’s that sure it’s the fact of like, you know, after the time comes you no longer need the help, you know, little by little. But then, at the same time, it’s like, you know everyone still needs.
Lawrence – Mmhmm.

AJ – Ya.

Lawrence - Absolutely. And let’s be honest, a learning disability, if you think of it as a learning difference, it may always be there. Ava, how’s it been with your parents?

Ava – For my parents it was actually kind of strange that they didn’t really know what a learning disability was at first because they were, they came from Iran, right, so that doesn’t really…well it didn’t exist there, kind of. So when they came here and in elementary school when they started talking to my teachers and they started finding out that I had one, you know, my dad was kind of like ‘Oh, she’s just lazy; she just has to work harder.’ But, my mom, she tried to understand, and she’s still, she is still working with me, she’s still understanding the concept of what it is and why do I need help with it and I think my mom’s adapting to it, like the idea of it. She just wants me to get as much help as possible so that I can have a better future. That’s her main goal. And then, you know, my dad’s just kind of like ‘No, you’re just lazy. Work harder. Stay up later.’

[Laughs.]

Lawrence – He’s still convinced you’re just lazy.


Lawrence – Okay, so let’s talk about again, this podcast is aimed at teachers, right? So I want to ask all three of you to think of a time when, in trying to self-advocate, even with Miss D doing her great work to give you strategies and everything else, think about a time when it didn’t go too well with a teacher. I just want to think about, how did that make you feel when you go in there, you’re trying to talk and to use your terminology AJ, you’re trying to meet someone in the middle, like trying to work out how this is going to work, and the teacher just didn’t want to know or was very negative. How does that impact you as a student? Ava, let’s start with you this time.

Ava – Well, probably mostly in, you know, elementary school and middle school I had that situation before, you know, my teachers really knew I had a learning disability, before I even knew I had a learning disability. A lot of teachers were just really like, ‘Okay, that’s your problem. Sorry.’ And that happened a little bit in ninth grade too, like, ‘That’s your problem. You talk to your resource teachers about it and they can talk to me.’ Like, that’s how they would tell me that they didn’t really want to hear it. Because I guess they were busy; like I understand that you’re a teacher, there’s more than just like me as a student.

Lawrence – Mmhmm.

Ava – There’s a whole high school of a bunch of classes, you know? But, when it comes to meeting in the middle, I personally, I’m not really good with that, because I don’t know how to speak to my teachers in a way that they would understand because I feel like when I do, they either assume that like I’m trying to say it’s all about me and I’m not, you know, trying to benefit both, my work and my class and like
myself, and be nice to the teacher. So I kind of like, resource kind of just helped me find that middle ground because otherwise I’m pretty sure they would still assume, I’d assume that they were being dismissive and stuff, you know?

Lawrence – Okay. Mason? Any thoughts of a negative experience you had with a teacher and what you’d like to share?

Mason – I once had a negative experience with a teacher in a past school who did kind of the same thing that Miss D did. She wasn’t that supportive really. She did exactly what needed to be done in terms of work and getting out of the classroom for the assignments but I felt like I was trapped there and it wasn’t really a good time. It felt like it was, well it really just felt like she wasn’t on my side. I knew she was there to help me, but it felt like she was being pushed to help me and she didn’t want to though.

Lawrence – So you never felt really embraced by her in terms of supporting you on your journey.

Mason – Ya, and then like the last year she just left for some reason, but, I wish that the teacher that I had after that, the one who did all of the things I needed her to do for me in terms of all my projects and stuff, I wish that she was there earlier because she helped me with studying and everything. She helped me with my grades and everything, but the teacher before that...

Lawrence – And it’s fair to say, as well Mason, I think, when you get that second teacher who’s helping you get everything you need, it has a huge impact on your own performance, right guys? Because as we feel, hey I can actually do this and it’s not me being dumb.

Mason – Ya.

Lawrence – You know, with this help I’m now getting good grades. But it changes the way school feels, correct?

Mason – Mmhmm, it does.

Lawrence – Mmhmm. AJ.

AJ – Well I’ve, before Miss D I’ve had a few resource teachers and I don’t really want to go into much detail, but yes, there has been times when, you know, when you’re trying to talk, but at the same time as it’s like you’re playing catch with yourself, you know? And, the same thing as Ava’s situation, you know, when you’re talking to other teachers, especially at the time, like grade nine for instance, it’s embarrassing number one, you know? I was one of those students who would fear every time when you know if we had to read out loud for the class, and then when it finally comes to you, instead of like, relaxing you know, you’re too busy trying to read ahead so that you can find all the tough words and pronounce it in your head and stuff. But when it finally comes, then you know, it’s like this huge scene, especially with the teacher. It ruins your day, you know? It puts you in a bad mood and at the same time, you know like, I’m one of the people who wear their emotions on their face, you know? You’ll see it right off the bat and I realize it affects the way how people around are; with my friends, when I get home, it’s even worse, you know, because at the same time you feel like, you know, you feel dumb.
Lawrence – Mmhmm.

AJ – You know what I mean? And, I guess, I think it’s especially harder if the teacher doesn’t understand where the student’s coming from. You know, it’s not a pleasant thing you know, because, at the end of the day, it really does affect what you put on paper.

Lawrence – Right.

AJ – Ya.

Lawrence – Okay, so let’s talk a little bit, I wanted to get that negative out there because I think it’s important for all of us involved with LD students to realize that impact, and AJ, I think you very articulately spoke to that negative feeling and that pent up stress that you then carry around with you and affects the school input. So let’s talk about, we all know Miss D’s wonderful, right? That’s a given. He’s giving her the thumbs up, right? But let’s talk about, so what’s changed? What in you has Miss D kind of turned on that has changed the school experience for you guys? Mason, I’m going to start with you this time.

Mason – What has changed?

Lawrence – What’s she helped you discover in yourself?

Mason – That I am fully capable of being my own advocate, you know, self-advocacy. She helped me realize that school isn’t that big of, it’s not there to be stressful, like it is stressful, but when you have the right tools and you know what to do, it really benefits you and it is good all around.

Lawrence: Great, that’s fine. You don’t have to keep talking, it’s good when you get to the end of an answer! Ava.

Ava – Confidence definitely! A big thing is you know, confidence with my work and my peers and my teachers, speaking to them, that’s one thing that Miss Dworet really helped me, just bring out myself that confidence because I haven’t had that before in any other school year not even high school just in general. So you know, building that confidence is something she really helped me with and being able to stand up for myself and speak up with… when it comes to schoolwork; and talking to my teachers, and you know with all that kind of stuff ya...

Lawrence – AJ?

AJ – Confidence and perseverance! That, you know, no longer do I, you know, wait for everyone else to get to class before I go into my resource, you know, room. That I am not afraid to no longer ask for help, you know, because it’s true, you know? There is somebody else out there who probably does have the same question as you do. And Miss D and I talked about this just the other day, where it’s just like, you know what we’re all human you know, we all think the same, we act the same, we do the same thing, the only thing that sets us apart is what we learn in practice from each other, you know. So, that’s just it, like, I no longer feel embarrassed about this, you know needing the extra help in hand. As a matter of fact I wear like a trophy [Laughs.] so, you know and just, hard work pays off, just keep going.
Lawrence – There you go! There’s a story of perseverance and I like that word as well. So we’re kind of wrapping up now, but I’ve got couple of closing thoughts. So, first one is: what’s the biggest misconception teachers had of you? So when you, before you were, you know, able to really say this is what I need, this is how I learn, these are the things that I need from you to get to that middle ground, what was the misconception that most hurt you when you heard it back from a teacher?

Lawrence – Oh go for Ava, she wants in on this one.

[Laughs.]

Ava – When I walk into a classroom and I don’t really speak a lot at first, I’m really quite and I don’t really answer the questions and I do my work but at first it’s not going to be as great as it can be. And I think, one thing I’ve heard from a lot of teachers like before is at first they just assumed that like, I wasn’t a good student. They thought I was one of those: I’ll skip this class whenever; It’s not important; you know high school is this or high school is that. That’s who they thought I was because may be I didn’t speak up as much at first, and my work wasn’t great as it could have been but that was just me like adapting to the class and getting conformable with it and it takes me a while and I think that’s one thing that really hurt me is that they just assumed automatically when they saw me for like the first week of school that I wasn’t as into it as everyone else but that was just me getting into my comfort zone in that class and being able to work with everybody else around me because if I don’t know the students in the class or if I am not comfortable with a teacher, I haven’t had her before, or him, you know, it takes a while for me so, and that’s one thing that I think they assumed. They made this like, assumptions at first and I didn’t really like that.

Lawrence – So what do you do differently nowadays Ava, do you talk to teachers early on and let them know that by yourself?

Ava – Ya. That’s the first thing I do. I think that was the first thing I did this semester. Especially, when I went to that class the first thing I did, after the class I spoke to the teacher and I said, you know, I have a learning disability, and these are my accommodations and at first I am going to be quite and you know, I just try to ease them into the idea of like who I am as a student.

Lawrence – Okay. Mason, what misconception teachers had about Mason when they first met him?

Mason – Can I go way back?

Lawrence – You can go wherever you like my friend.

[Laughs.]

Mason – Alright. Apparently, I am always told this with like my mom because she talks to all my teachers, she’s very involved. Like way back in may be grade two-ish, my teachers just thought that I was a terrible student, I didn’t care to learn anything, but after a while, in that school and got all the way to grade 4, this teacher we didn’t like, sure she was mean but she saw potential in me. She wasn’t exactly sure what it was but she knew that if she just kept going, and you know, kept believing in me that I could do well, and she was the teacher who actually helped me get my IEP and it’s ironic because she was the teacher we hated the most at that school.
Ava – Same.

[Laughs.]

Mason – Ya thanks to her! Like...school is better now and it’s just... it’s fair.

Lawrence – Great. AJ?

AJ – Success! The conversation about it. I remember I had a teacher one day who told me that I will never make it, ever be successful in life. That I was going to, you know, be one of those people trying to, you know, always wishing that they have what they could never get and especially, because I want to go into film when I get older, right? And it’s a scary thing already, you know what I mean? Because you spend so much time trying to think about what you want to do but then to hear a teacher tell you that you’re gonna never be successful because of reasons be it. It’s kind of like you know, it’s very hurtful, and at the same time it does bring you down and then what’s worse is when you start to believe it. But then now, after, you know, when you finally meet the right people, or you’re assigned a class with the right people then, they help you, you know what I mean? You want to be a director? You want to be a screenwriter? Okay. Well, your reading and writing is not up to par, let’s get you to the level that you need to be to get where you want to be. So I think, that’s my experience right there that once you finally given the chance with the right person who actually cares about. and keeps you in mind, it helps out.

Lawrence – Ya and the other interesting thing as well AJ is that when you’re talking about well I’d like to be this, well guess what you need your English to be better and your reading to be better to get to that. It gives you a different view of your studies as well, right? Because suddenly, now, you are linking your status to where you want to go in life, which sometimes for teenagers could be a big leap right?

Okay, so just before we wrap up, last question. For teachers listening to this podcast, if you from anytime in your school experience had one thing you wanted those teachers to know about working with kids like you guys, what would you want to tell them?

[Sings music.]

[Laughs.]

Lawrence – Anyone wanna go first? AJ, do you want to go?

AJ – Okay, to all my teachers out there, [Laughs.] for... just know that, for people who are, either getting into the program for the first time, or who are not quite adjusted to it yet, it’s not that we’re trying to hide it, it’s just we’re embarrassed by it you know, because from what is shown, what we’re told is that you need to be academic you know, applied is not going to cut it. You know, if you want to get somewhere, if you want to go to the good university, you know if you, you know, if you want to be successful, that you know, you have to be academic, and that’s the mindset that we’re pretty much told in school so being in this program kind of tells us that we are not going to that high level in life, you know, that college is not a good thing that you know. Just being in one step behind everyone else is not going to pay off. So if you kind of sit down and just, and tell, just make them feel comfortable with the environment and let them know that you understand that it does feel embarrassing, but slow and
steady does win the race. Twenty bucks though, you’ll see them in lights and you’ll be like hey, I knew that kid.

Lawrence – There you go! Mason? Any thoughts? What would you tell a teacher about dealing with kids like you that would have helped you along your way?

Mason – That it’s probably going to be frustrating, just a little bit, I mean...

[Laughs.]

Lawrence – Hey, I think that true, listen, again as a parent of an LD kid; I know the frustration thing right? It happens a lot, because we all get frustrated with each other, parents, teachers, students in that process. We all have times where we’re like ‘really again?’ like we all have been there right?

Mason – Ya, it’s going to be frustrating, they’ll be frustrated, you’ll be frustrated, but that’s only because it’s a new thing I’m saying, and it’s, how you get through the problem, or it’s not necessarily a problem but it’s just...how you level the playing field and accommodate the student that really shows that, that you made an impact.

Lawrence – Mmhmm. Wise words. Ava?

Ava – Just, you know just be understanding, that’s like my biggest thing, you know, be understanding. I feel like, some teachers, I am not saying that all teachers are like this but some might not want to understand as much because they may be don’t agree with the idea of it and I have had my teachers in the past like you know like, but obviously in elementary school, I just never really thought that it was a real thing before and they told my mother that before. So like, be understanding and try to understand you know what the student is going through and how it’s hard for them but they’re putting in that effort and they’re doing their best and I think that’s one thing that resource has is it helps you putting that extra effort, and if all teachers could be understanding of that, you know help out in the way that they can, the best way they can. That’s a big thing that I would say...Ya.

Lawrence – I think that’s great. One thing I’ve really heard you all saying and I just want to paraphrase AJ saying about teachers meeting you in in the middle. Helping you to know where you can stretch to but then also coming towards you to help it happen right?

So I want to say a big thank you to AJ, Mason, and Eva from York Mills Collegiate for being with us this afternoon. I want to thank the wonderful Miss D for bringing you guys along.

Ava – Thank you Miss!

Lawrence – And also thank Miss D for her own time on the panel here.

AJ – Thank you.

Lawrence – This is been TalkLD and until next time we wish you all a very good evening!