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## Got Attitude?

A disability awareness toolkit for teachers is something we had talked about doing for a long time. In 2010, we decided to take action. At our spring writing workshop, we developed a survey instrument to capture attitudes toward people with disabilities and give us some direction in developing our toolkit. During the summer workshop, we used the data collected to begin creating the toolkit for teachers. It has been a more challenging job than we first imagined but we wanted to report on our progress and let you know that we will continue to work on this in 2011. We welcome your comments.

All of the editorial board members felt strongly that the data should not be collected through impersonal, anonymous surveys but rather in “face-to-face” interviews that would take place in our own schools and communities. Direct contact with the interviewees would enable us to better understand the attitudes of our own family members, neighbors, and classmates toward people with disabilities. Many of us have been advocating for students with disabilities since middle school through our work with *Connect-Ability*. It was important for us to figure out how we can improve our own efforts to raise awareness as well as to help teachers reach out to more students.

To get a better idea of the interview process, we met with a panel of experienced interviewers during the March workshop. The panel included local college admissions staff, employment center directors, and professionals with disabilities. The panel members identified the elements of good interviews, stressing the importance of doing research to get ready for an interview, of being on time for the interview, of engaging with interviewees by asking as well as answering questions, and of remembering to relax and be ourselves. Panel members advised us to treat the interview like a conversation. Looking at interviewing from the perspective of being interviewed helped us see how to be better interviewers.

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**Interview (n.) 1514, “face-to-face meeting, formal conference,” from Fr. *entrevue*, verbal noun from *s’entrevoir* “to see each other, visit each other briefly, have a glimpse of.”**

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We then engaged in a lengthy conversation with the Capital District’s “premier interviewer,” Joe Donahue, host of a daily radio program, who interviews dozens of people each week. Mr. Donahue urged us to rely on our natural curiosity when conducting interviews. Illustrating a number of interview strategies with stories of his own experiences, he encouraged

us to ask questions that require more than a yes or no answer, never to interrupt a good story, and to ask one question at a time. It is better, he advised, for an interviewer to be a good listener than to recite pre-determined questions one after the other. There are many surprises along the way in interviewing, and he mentioned that he found his experiences of the last 20+ years to be both rewarding and educational. He told us he never tires of asking people questions and he wished us a similarly rewarding experience as we began our interviews.

### Tips for interviewers

- Introduce yourself and the survey
- Use small talk to break the ice
- Ask one question at a time
- Accept periods of silence
- Do not interrupt
- Do not challenge or criticize
- Take good notes/recording (permission)
- Close with a thank you

Listening to experienced interviewers helped us come up with the kinds of questions we thought would provide valuable information to include in a disabilities awareness toolkit for teachers. Working in small groups, we identified demographics that we considered important to our data collection. We agreed that it would be helpful to know the gender, age, ethnic group, and experience with disability or people with disabilities of each of the interviewees.

### Demographics

- Gender
- Age
- Race
- Experience with disability

We eventually drafted five questions which we believed would capture the information we were after. These five questions were edited and included in the interview protocol.

1. Tell me about your first experience with a person with a disability.
2. What is it about people with disabilities that causes others to make fun of them?
3. Why is it easy for people to feel sad about people with disabilities?

- From this list of words (see page 6) pick one GOOD word to describe DISABILITY and one POOR word to describe DISABILITY, and explain why you picked them.
- You've been hired to teach elementary school students about disabilities and people with disabilities. What is one idea/point/concept you would include in your teaching?

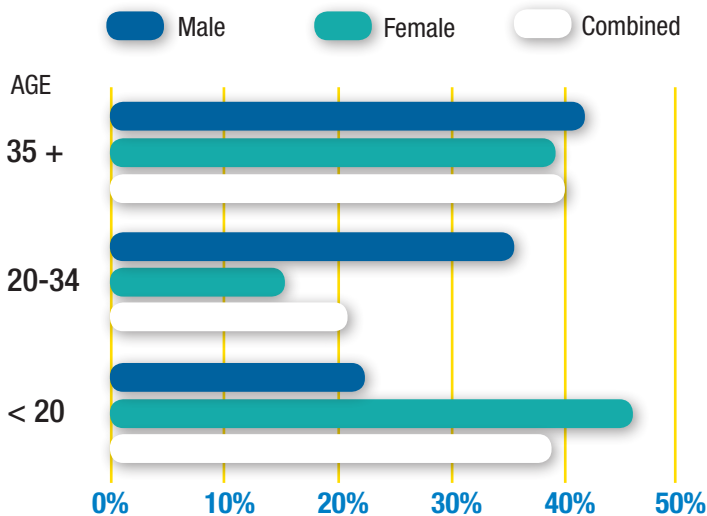
At the end of the two-day workshop, we came together to agree on the final protocol which we would use to conduct at least two interviews each in our schools or communities during the remainder of the school year.

Returning for the August workshop, we began analyzing the data we had collected. A total of 80 surveys were submitted by 26 students, far more than the assignment called for. We practiced reading the preliminary tables of data which had been prepared for us by our writing coach and answering each other's questions by referencing the appropriate data. Re-structuring the data by age and gender led to the design of additional tables. More analyses took place in small group discussions. Some of the results of our interviews are highlighted below in a variety of tables accompanied by a narrative including some comments by interviewees that seemed especially relevant to the development of the teacher toolkit.

## Who did we interview?

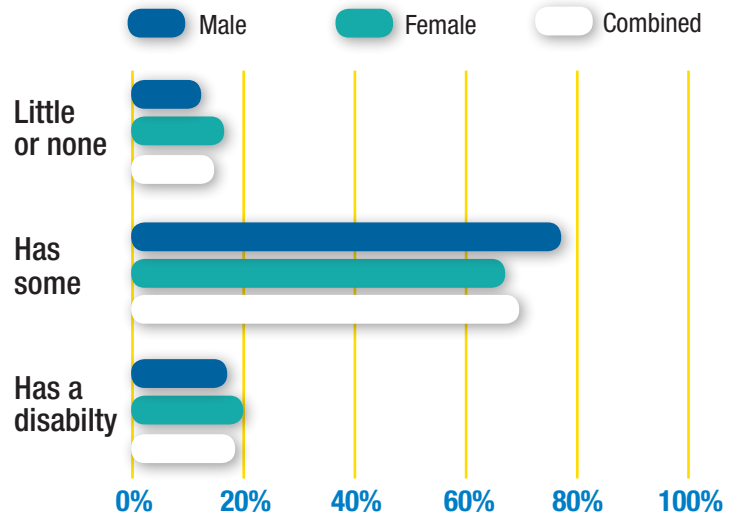
We interviewed 80 people, 54 females (68%) and 26 males (32%). The 80 interviewees were fairly evenly split between those who were 35 years of age or older (40%) and those under 20 (39%). Most males (42%) were 35 or older; most females (46%) were under 20 (Table 1).

**Table 1: Age of interviewees**



The majority of interviewees (70%) reported having had some experience with disability. Twenty percent of our interviewees had a disability, while 10% reported having had little or no contact with a person with a disability (Table 2).

**Table 2: Experience with disability**

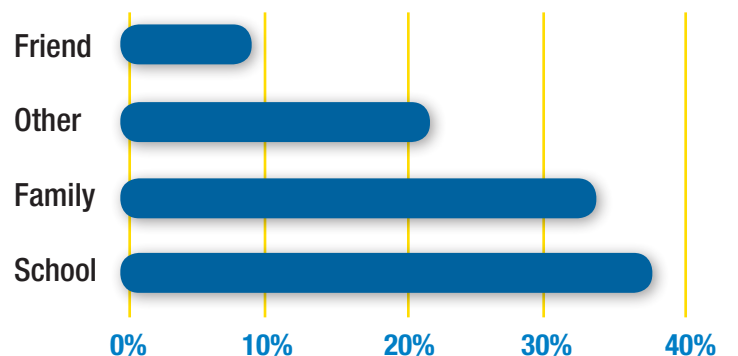


## What did our interviewees tell us?

**Question #1: Tell me about your first experience with a person with a disability.**

As we expected, the majority of interviewees (70%) told us that their first encounter with a person with a disability was either in school (36%) or at home (34%) (Table 3). Interestingly, however, when we asked them if they had received any information about disabilities either in school or at home, most said that they had not. This is important when considering how and where to introduce information about disabilities to students. In addition to providing information on disabilities in the classroom, school-based disabilities awareness programs may want to include materials for students to take home to use in family discussions.

**Table 3: First experience with a person with a disability**



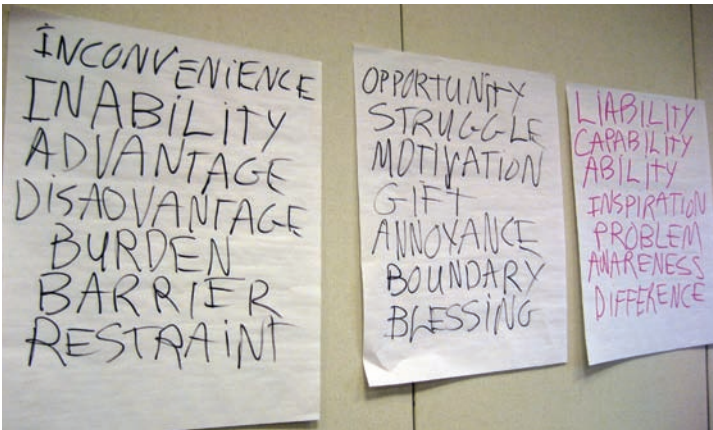
" I first noticed a classmate [with a disability] on the playground at recess. No one said anything."

My first experience was when I worked as an aide in an elementary school and they assigned me a kid with Downs syndrome.

" I saw my cousin on holidays who was obsessed by trains but I don't recall anyone explaining why."

" When I was a child my great aunt had a stroke and couldn't move her arm which she held motionless at her side. No one talked about it."

**Question #2: What is it about people with disabilities that**



Editorial board members make a word list

**causes other people to make fun of them?**

When asked to explain why people make fun of those with disabilities, interviewees gave answers that fell into two general categories – lack of information and intolerance (Table 4). When we broke out these two general categories by age and experience with disability, we found that the reason cited by most subgroups was intolerance with lack of information (“uninformed”) being cited primarily by interviewees with disabilities who were younger than 35. This suggests that incorporating an educational intervention into the classroom aimed at providing students with information about disabilities may increase their tolerance and acceptance thereby reducing the teasing, joking, and mocking directed at students with disabilities by those who are uninformed.

**Table 4: Most frequent response by age and**

**experience with disabilities**

**Age**

Experience with disability	<20	20-34	35+
Has a Disability	Uninformed	Uninformed	Intolerant
Some experience	Intolerant	Intolerant	Intolerant
Little to no experience	Intolerant	Intolerant	Intolerant

" People make fun of people because they don't understand the disability - maybe they don't know anyone with a disability - maybe they're really scared of us and making fun makes them less scared."

" People act without thinking. We laughed at my cousin with a disability because he was always the last one picked when we chose baseball teams. We thought he was different and we didn't like kids who were different."

" People who make fun of me don't really know me or anything about my disability. They think I'm different and that is all they care about."

**Question #3: Why is it easy for people to feel sad about people with disabilities?**

Most interviewees (66%) told us that they thought it was easy for people to feel sad about people with disabilities because of the many challenges people with disabilities have to deal with on a daily basis. Their opinion was that being in a wheelchair, using a Braille reader, learning sign language, or reading at the first grade level in junior high school were challenges that meant that people with disabilities had to work harder. The remaining 34 percent of the interviewees said that it is easy for people to feel sad about people with disabilities because some people believe that disability reduces the value of a life. They felt that expectations for students with disabilities were lower than for other students, and that emphasis was always placed on what they couldn't do rather than on what they could do.

*" People feel sad because they think people with disabilities are incapable."*

*" They're sad when they think of how a person with a disability struggles."*

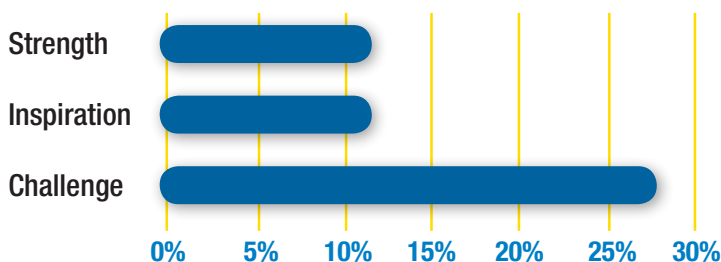
*" They think of how they suffer."*

**Question #4: From this list of words pick one GOOD word and one POOR word to describe disability and explain why you picked them.**

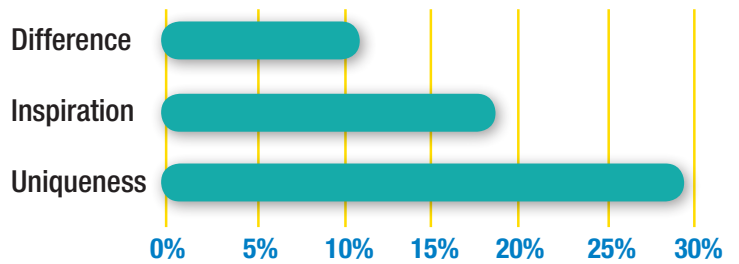
Researchers who study language have shown that words are gender-charged, i.e., when asked to describe an event, men tend to use different words than women. When we reviewed the good words and poor words that interviewees chose from a list of 30 words (see list below), we found differences, as expected, between males and females (Tables 5, 6, 7, 8).

Word List	
advantage	gift
annoyance	impairment
asset	inability
barrier	inconvenience
benefit	inspiration
blessing	liability
boundary	limitation
burden	opportunity
capability	problem
challenge	shortcoming
constraint	sickness
difference	strength
disadvantage	struggle
disorder	uniqueness
equality	weakness

**Table 5: Good Word: Male Interviewees**



**Table 6: Good Word: Female Interviewees**



When asked for a good word, most males (27%) chose "Challenge;" most females (29%) chose "Uniqueness." Both males and females, however, selected "Inspiration" as one of their top three words. Anecdotally, interviewees with disabilities told us the word "Inspiration" bothered them because it implied that people with disabilities are – or should be – inspiring super heroes instead of just being allowed to lead ordinary lives like everyone else. Viewing them as super heroes put pressure on them, making them feel uncomfortable and misunderstood. Others mentioned that learning about famous people with disabilities who accomplished great things helped them focus on what people with disabilities can do not on what they can't do.

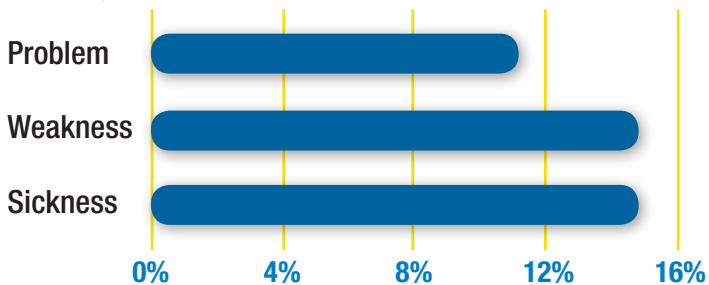
*" I am unique because of my disability. It makes me stand out in a good way. I find different ways to do things."*

*" People with disability inspire me because they have to overcome barriers to succeed."*

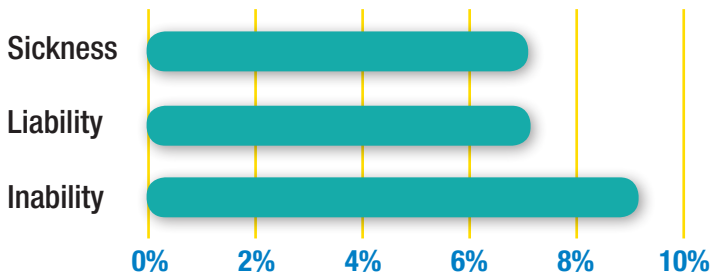
*" We are challenged! Challenges give us a reason to get out of bed every day. Challenges motivate us to do good things."*

When asked for a poor word, male interviewees were split between "weakness" and "sickness" as their top choice. The most popular selection for females was "inability," though "sickness" was one of their top three poor words as well. This finding debunks the myth that disability is a sickness, and suggests that disabilities awareness programs would do well to reinforce this notion for more widespread acceptance.

**Table 7: Poor Word: Male Interviewees**



**Table 8: Poor Word: Female Interviewees**



*"Weakness is a poor word because it implies that a disability is a negative thing when in reality it can be a positive experience even with the struggles. A disability makes you stronger not weaker."*

*"Inability is a poor word because a disability doesn't make someone unable. It may set them back a little but it doesn't take away their ability to do most things."*

*"Someone with a disability isn't sick. Sickness is just the wrong kind of label."*

**Question #5: You've been hired to teach elementary students about disabilities. What is one idea/point/concept you would include in your teaching?**

The most popular concept selected by almost one-third of the interviewees was "Awareness," which translates into providing students with factual information about disabilities and the culture of disability. Other concepts cited by the interviewees as essential in an educational module for students were "Similarity," "Acceptance," "Uniqueness," and "Inclusion" (Table 9).

**Table 9: Key disabilities awareness ideas, points, concepts**

<b>Awareness</b>	<b>30%</b>
<b>Similarity</b>	<b>25%</b>
<b>Acceptance</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>Uniqueness</b>	<b>15%</b>
<b>Inclusion</b>	<b>9%</b>

Anecdotally, interviewees suggested that these five concepts are critical to the success of an educational intervention on disabilities. Q&A sessions and group discussions should be provided to enable students to exchange information and clarify their thoughts on disabilities and people with disabilities.

*"If I were a teacher I would have my students with and without disabilities work together to show how similar they really are."*

*"The teacher should find someone with a disability to talk to her students about differences. Everyone is different and people with disabilities embrace their differences. We don't want to be made fun of because we're different."*

*"Interaction and discussion are needed. Let kids ask questions in a classroom. It's appropriate to ask questions in a place where you can get the facts."*

*"If there's a student with a disability in the classroom, ask the student to talk about his experience with a disability, and ask his classmates to talk about their experiences with having a student with a disability in their classroom."*