

Crista M. Force*Overcoming the Obstacles: Life Stories of Scientists with Learning Disabilities*
(Curriculum and Instruction / Education)

Scientific discovery is at the heart of solving many of the problems facing contemporary society. Scientists are retiring at rates that exceed the numbers of new scientists. Unfortunately, scientific careers still appear to be outside the reach of most individuals with learning disabilities. The purpose of this research is to better understand the methods by which successful learning disabled scientists have overcome the barriers and challenges associated with their learning disabilities in their preparation and performance as scientists. This narrative inquiry will involve the researcher writing the life stories of eight scientists.

These life stories will be generated from extensive interviews in which each of the scientists recount their life histories. The researcher will use narrative analysis to “make sense” of these learning disabled scientists’ life stories. The narrative analysis will require the researcher to identify and describe emergent themes characterizing each scientist’s life. A cross-case analysis will be performed to uncover commonalities and differences in the lives of these eight individuals. Initial results of the cross-case analysis of four participants revealed that all four scientists had a passion for science that emerged at an early age, which, with strong drive and determination, drove these individuals to succeed in spite of the many obstacles arising from their learning disabilities. The preliminary cross-case analysis also revealed differences in the degree to which each scientist accepted his or her learning disability. While some demonstrated inferior feelings about their successes as scientists, still other individuals revealed feelings of having superior abilities in areas such as visualization and working with people. These individuals revealed beliefs that they developed these special abilities as a result of their learning differences, which made them better than their non-learning disabled peers in certain areas. Finally, the researcher will discuss implications of these findings in the light of special accommodations that can be made by teachers, school counselors, and parents to encourage learning disabled children who demonstrate interest in becoming scientists.