

Running head: TEACHER VIEWS- ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

Student Use of Assistive Technology: Middle School Teacher Views

**Researcher Identity Memo**

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As one who spent many years embarrassed by poor handwriting and dismal spelling ability, the age of technology offered a combination of hope and possibility. Spell check, copy, paste, delete, and insert, were all features that replaced writing drudgery and failure with successful presentation of thoughts. In the resource classroom I have witnessed delight on faces as students, using technology, became proud authors of poetry published in the halls and PowerPoints presented to PTA and other different groups. A third grader, previously functionally illiterate couldn't be pulled from the computer for lunch because he was not finished a story made possible by word prediction software paired with picture to text software. Students even became guest speakers at a university, sharing tales of positive writing experiences with teachers. These experiences and more have inflamed the urgency of providing students with special needs the technology that will unleash their thoughts and talents. Uncovering strategies for successful integration of assistive technology is the fuse these participants can provide.

While listening to comedian Goldie Hawn, advocate for students with special needs, some of my own childhood memories flashed through my mind. Although I did love school, and many teachers were wonderful, memories of teacher disappointment, anger, and resulting embarrassing scenes that centered on my creative spelling, and "messy" handwriting remain vivid. In college, I was fortunate to have a roommate who was able to spell. She would edit my essays so that clearer thoughts emerged. Although she commented at the end of four years that my spelling had dramatically improved, I continue to have great difficulty finding appropriate spelling for more precise vocabulary. On visits home from the university, my young brother struggled with

spelling. I was eager to assist students in transcending spelling and handwriting difficulties.

In the late 70's I was introduced to the world of computing. Although the first machine I used was as large as a refrigerator, with a screen only 3 lines long, and the film had to be developed in a darkroom, my mind reeled at the prospects of being able to correct spelling and punctuation without redoing the entire piece. In the early 80's my son, reading at age 4 and vocabulary well above grade level began having trouble in kindergarten. By the mid 80s both my sons were labeled as having Learning Disabilities with major writing issues. In 2000 I learned about assistive technology and its role in the lives of people with special needs. I wondered...through the appropriate student use of technology, would it be possible to decrease anxiety and aversion to writing? Could that unleash hidden gifts and ideas that have been suppressed?

My journey into teaching has a two-fold mission.

1. To share the excitement and love of lifetime learning.
2. To help students transcend their challenges so that they too, may (see # 1.)

As the Assistive technology Coordinator for my school district, my goal is to provide technology to our students who need that extra help. Without encouragement and tools, a student with unconventional spelling and poor handwriting or other needs, may become too stressed and discouraged to learn and share ideas through writing. Without teacher understanding and support, the technology remains unused.

After reading Schram (2006) I see my self as bending towards an interpretive perspective, basically satisfied with things, having an eye out for ways to make

improvements. I do recognize shortcomings in the area of Special Education. I borrow a critical eye in effort to change attitudes with respect to assistive technology.

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After hours of Reading

One set finished...

3x articles left

And writing...typing

Sore shoulders & heavy brow

Walk now?...

Later!...

Mother calling...

Now?....

Not now!

Concepts jumbled....

Rough draft filled with challenges....

Too many exclamations!

Mind cluttered with questions, comments, insights, memories, thoughts, worries,

duties....

Stomach whining...nudging for distraction...

Yet 3 yards away, looking for tasty tidbits, the dusty male cardinal is hopping

gracefully through the dry crinkly leaves (that need to be raked) ...

A flock of 5 honking geese fly in formation over my right shoulder to land with a  
swisssshhh --- splash in the water....

I yearn for quality time with my sleek blue kayak unceremoniously straddling 2  
beat up old tires filled with stagnant rain water and mosquito larvae

Leave the computer...

Walk now!

As my blood pumps and the cool air soothes,

My mind races!

A Researcher???

Me???

More than a decade separates me from the time weakened cries of my baby and youngsters needing attention. I do have duties but in all honesty, I also have more time than ever before. Even though my own childhood memories are more than 4 decades old, the observations and stories of students, current Susans, bearing the brands of lazy, under achiever, terrible speller, messy writer, echoes those recollections, replaying the enormous effort resulting in the dull pain of "not good enough" or failure and frustration.

Can I do more than float gently, watching birds dive for supper and drift with the reddened sun as it sinks beyond the horizon?

Can I find a researcher beneath???

Interviewing teachers may provide insights that could transform, even one student into a:

- Don Johnston- (Who overcame challenges of dyslexia to become a CEO of a company dedicated to helping students with special needs),
- Ann Bancroft- (Who was the first woman to reach the North Pole and is in the National Woman's Hall of Fame),
- Thomas Edison- (Who was a great scientist who brightened our lives),
- Princess Beatrice of Great Britain- (Who speaks out about dyslexia),
- Patricia Polacco- (Who first read at age 14 and now writes and illustrates children's books.)

The baton is accepted.

### Bibliography

Schram, T.H. (2006). *Conceptualizing and proposing qualitative research* (sec. ed.). Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall.