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**Invisible Disability, Visible People:
A Closer Look at the Experiences of Teachers with Learning Disabilities**

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Abstract

Throughout their schooling experiences, students with learning disabilities (LD) face numerous academic and socioemotional challenges. Some of these individuals rise above these obstacles to obtain a postsecondary education and become professionals. Recently, there have been a number of individuals with learning disabilities who have chosen a career in teaching. There is a lack of research that documents the experiences of teachers with learning disabilities. The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain an understanding of the challenges that the teachers with learning disabilities strive to overcome and the supports that they receive which facilitate their inception into teaching. Four teachers with learning disabilities were the participants in this collective case study research. Data were collected through semistructured interviews. These data were coded, collapsed into themes, and the results were presented in a narrative form. The resultant 9 themes are: (a) Perspectives on School Experiences, (b) Identification and Effective Accommodations, (c) Isolation, Frustration, and Support, (d) Awareness of Learning Disability at Age 18, (e) Disclosure of Learning Disability, (f) Negative Impact of the Learning Disability Label, (g) Desire, Drive, and Obstacles, (h) Empathy, Compassion, and Self-Concept, and (i) Critical Views of Colleagues. The themes reflect the common experiences among participants. The discussion brings forth new information that is not found in other research. The implications of this research will interest teacher federations, parents of students with LD, teachers, and educational researchers.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Over the past 4 decades, special education in Canada has defined itself as a service for individuals with exceptionalities beyond that which mainstream education can provide. According to Statistics Canada (2001), there over 23 million individuals with exceptionalities residing in Canada. One in every 10 elementary-aged children obtains help from special education programs in their school (Statistics Canada, 1997). In general, the umbrella for special education programming includes individuals with visual impairments, sensory disorders, behavioural disorders, developmental disabilities, physical disabilities, and learning disabilities (Learning Disabilities Association – Peel Region, n.d.); the majority of children who receive special education resources are learning disabled (Statistics Canada, 1999). Students with learning disabilities generally receive part of their instruction in a resource room and spend the rest of their day in their classrooms (Statistics Canada, 1999).

The term “learning disability” was first used in the 1960s to explain why students who were intelligent struggled in school (Weber & Bennett, 2004). Individuals with learning disabilities (LD) have average or above average intelligence; however, they are unable to achieve at their academic level (Wong, 1996). According to Statistics Canada (1999), a large number of students who receive special education help enjoy school and, compared to their peers, have a similar amount of friends. The most recent demographic information states that there are 100,360 children from the ages of 5-14 in Canada with a learning disability (Statistics Canada, 2001) or 4% of children 8-11 years (Milan, Hou, &

Wong, 2006). When this group is separated by gender, there are twice as many males with learning disabilities compared to females with learning disabilities (Weber & Bennett). Among the adult population, 451,420 individuals from the age of 15 and older have identified learning disabilities (Statistics Canada, 2001). The exact cause of a learning disability is not apparent, however, it is likely that genetic and biological factors may both contribute to this disability (Wong).

A learning disability does not affect every aspect of learning; instead, individuals with learning disabilities may have specific difficulties that relate to the attainment, preservation, organization, or use of oral and nonverbal information (Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario, n.d.). Consequently, students with learning disabilities may have deficiencies in one or more of the following areas: oral language, written language, math skills, organization skills, and/or social skills (Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario).

These children and youth with learning disabilities will not only have academic problems and cognitive processing issues but might have social and emotional problems as well (Gale, 2000). As a result, these individuals are labeled “at risk” as their environment or genetic make-up may negatively affect psychological development (Terrisse, 2000). In comparison to their peers, students with learning disabilities demonstrate poor self-concept and low self-esteem (Barlow & Turk, 2001) and anxiety (Manassis & Young, 2000). As a result of academic struggles, many adolescents with learning disabilities experience emotional distress (Barlow & Turk) and have a higher incidence of being clinically depressed as compared to their peers (Maag & Reid, 2006). As a consequence, 35%

of adolescents with learning disabilities face significant academic challenges and will drop out of high school (Statistics Canada, 1997).

Background of the Problem

The majority of people with disabilities face numerous obstacles and are often looked down upon by our society (Pope, 2001). Educational systems once had a negative view of people with special needs, and in the past these individuals felt defeated (Carrington & Brownlee, 2001). Legislation now guarantees that the rights of individuals with disabilities will be respected in the institutions of education and employment.

It has only recently been the case that adults have been included in the definition of learning disabilities (Holdman, 1997). Faced with the realization that a learning disability can never be “outgrown” (Gale, 2000), most young adults with learning disabilities choose to hide their identification from others rather than disclose it (Valle, Santiago, Volpitta & Connor, 2004). As a result, these individuals may in some ways feel isolated from their peers and the rest of society. Young adults with learning disabilities often face enormous challenges and social stereotypes (Pope, 2001).

A learning disability can affect every aspect of an adult’s life even though individuals may learn how to partially compensate for deficits. This challenge of compensating for deficits can affect people with learning disabilities through adulthood (Cordoni, O’Donnell, Ramaniah, Kurtz, & Rosenshein, 1981; Mangrun & Strichart, 1994; Polloway, Smith, & Patton, 1984; Smith, 1991; Staughn, 1988, cited in Holdman, 1997). Adults with learning disabilities may have careers that are

low paying and do not require a lot of skill (Werner, 1993 cited in Wong, 1996). It is imperative to assist adults with learning disabilities through accommodations, modifications, support, and understanding in order to give them an opportunity to achieve their full potential and realize positive self-esteem (Gale, 2000).

There are several individuals with learning disabilities who have faced adversity, risen above it, and later become thriving and stable adults (Gerber, Ginsberg, & Reiff, 1992; Gerber, Reiff, & Ginsberg, 1997, cited in Ferri, Keefe, & Gregg, 2001). The incidence of individuals with learning disabilities who have successfully finished college or university programs is on the rise (Ferri, Connor, Santiago, Valle, & Volpitta, 2005). In 2001-2002, Canadian universities and colleges accommodated for 21,737 students, and the majority of these exceptionalities were learning disabilities (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2003). Therefore, it is essential to understand the factors that have helped these individuals to become successful in order to support individuals with learning disabilities in their pursuit for higher education.

Statement of the Problem

Canadian laws exist for institutions of education and employment to protect all child and adult citizens including minorities and individuals with exceptionalities. Since the *Education Amendment Act of 1980 (Bill 82)*, it is the responsibility of school boards to provide special education services for their exceptional students. Under the *Ontario Education Act* (Ministry of Education of Ontario, 1990), the Ministry of Education is charged with the responsibility to ensure that all students with exceptionalities are provided with individualized,

special programs. More recently, the Ontario Human Rights Commission's *Disability Policy* (2003) was created to provide programs and policies for students with exceptionalities. Some of the first students with exceptionalities to complete their public education under the auspices of *Bill 82* are now completing their postsecondary education and they are entering the job market.

With respect to the workplace, under section 15 (1) in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (Department of Justice, 1982), individuals with exceptionalities are sheltered and are to receive equal treatment without prejudice. The *Canadian Human Rights Act* (Department of Justice, 1985) and *Ontario Human Rights Code* (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 1990) state that individuals with exceptionalities cannot be deprived of job opportunities and employers must provide their employees with necessary accommodations. Furthermore, one of the functions of the *Employment Equity Act* (Department of Justice, 1995) is to ensure that an individual is not denied a job based on his/her exceptionality. These laws exist to ensure that individuals with exceptionalities such as learning disabilities are not faced with discrimination and have equal job opportunities as the rest of the population.

These job opportunities include careers in teaching; however, individuals with learning disabilities are fairly new to the teaching population. Teachers with learning disabilities are a distinctive group of individuals because they are able to draw on their own childhood experiences and use this information to reach their students with learning disabilities (Ferri et al., 2005). This study will take a closer look at the experiences of teachers with this covert or "invisible" disability.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to better understand the experiences of teachers with learning disabilities through case study. It will be imperative to share the findings of this research with the public in order to reduce the stereotypes that surround teaching professionals with learning disabilities. Some teachers with learning disabilities readily develop productive professional relationships with students with learning disabilities (Ferri et al., 2005). Yet despite this, teachers with learning disabilities are faced with the dilemma of exposing their exceptionality to their colleagues, parents, and students for fear of being misunderstood or discriminated against (Valle et al., 2004). Teachers with learning disabilities may also fear rejection, and as a result, they hide their disability and remain silent (Holdman, 1997). This group of teachers often perceives that once someone is aware of their learning disability, they will no longer be seen or treated as “normal.” Understanding the effects of this type of stigma on an individual with a learning disability cannot be recognized unless a person is willing to share his or her experiences (Ferri et al.). There is apprehension that individuals with learning disabilities have in disclosing their stories; therefore, sharing their experiences is often rare.

Those teachers with learning disabilities who do disclose to others often reveal their own struggles and provide a positive role model for students with learning disabilities (Valle et al., 2004). Further, teachers with learning disabilities are able to help professionals and parents understand the obstacles faced by students

with learning disabilities, and they can help to create an effective special education program (Ferri et al., 2001).

Research Questions

This qualitative study of teachers with learning disabilities will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the previous educational experiences of teachers with learning disabilities?
2. How do previous educative experiences influence their teaching of students with learning disabilities?
3. What are the barriers for teachers with learning disabilities? What are the strategies or supports that assist these teachers in their practice?

Rationale

As a researcher, I have a connection with this topic of inquiry: I am a teacher with a learning disability. For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to be a teacher, and I was determined to reach my goal. I was diagnosed with a learning disability when I was 11 years old. I was placed in special education for half the day, where I received assistance for math and language. I was the only girl in my special education class. In the afternoons, I was placed in a regular classroom and struggled academically. As a result, I never felt that I belonged in either of these two settings. In grade 8, my special education teacher recognized that I had low self-esteem, and she started to build my confidence in my own abilities.

When I entered high school, I was placed in a nonacademic course stream for English. I was determined to attain my goal of becoming a teacher, and I soon

realized that I needed to acquire advanced academic courses in English to go to university. In grade 11, I had an English teacher that I respected and I decided to ask her for her evaluation of my abilities. When I first approached her, she was very positive and reassured me that I was a determined individual and could obtain my dream of attending university with continued hard work. Then she asked me to answer a question on the classroom blackboard. Her evaluation changed: In front of my peers she noted that I would not get into university because I lacked academic ability and I would be very limited in my career choices because of my exceptionality.

Because of my learning disability I have struggled both academically and emotionally throughout my school career. Yet, my personal experiences have shaped and affected the way that I now teach, especially when dealing with students with exceptionalities. There are days when I question my ability to teach, and there are times when I feel that my exceptionality isolates me from my colleagues.

I am passionate about highlighting the uniqueness of teachers with learning disabilities. Some teachers with learning disabilities are resilient. Resilient individuals are those who are “at risk” yet show remarkable strengths and imagination in order to overcome their situation (Barlow & Turk, 2001). Resiliency is the ability to endure and recover from adversity and sorrow (Heiman, 2002). Students with disabilities overcome challenges with support from their family and friends and, in particular, parents who believe in their abilities and future (Heiman). Resilient individuals create coping mechanisms which allow them to overcome obstacles (Barlow & Turk). Through case study, the current research will

investigate how resilient teachers with learning disabilities positively overcome barriers in order to reach their goals. These hurdles have been presented in previous education experiences, in choosing a teaching career, or in their current classroom practice.

The experiences of teachers with learning disabilities are not often explicitly discussed (Valle et al., 2004); perhaps disclosure is avoided because of fear of exposure (Ferri et al., 2005). This research has allowed teachers with learning disabilities an opportunity to voice their stories about their previous education experiences and present teaching challenges without negative repercussions.

Theoretical Framework

As the researcher, this work was viewed through a lens that has been shaped by my personal experience and philosophies of education. As a teacher with a learning disability, I am influenced by my past educative experiences and my perspective on teaching and learning. Humanistic theory provides the theoretical framework for this study. Consistent with constructivism, the humanistic philosophy states that individuals construct their reality and they cannot fully know the reality of others (Rogers, 1980). A humanistic approach to education values an attitude of caring and respect for students; a humanistic approach to research emphasizes seeing the world through the participant's, not the investigator's eyes (Myers, 1986).

Specifically, the work of humanist Carl Rogers will be applied to this research study. Carl Rogers (1980) proposed "The Person Centred Approach" in 1959. This approach postulates that individuals have the ability to truly understand themselves.

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Rogers believed that every human being has the ability and desire to fulfill his or her true potential (Rogers, 1980). However, one must first acknowledge his/her talents and capabilities, which is the process of "self-actualization." Individuals are motivated to learn and grow as they overcome problems or obstacles with the assistance of other supportive relationships in their life (Rogers). Furthermore, Rogers also believed that an individual develops his/her sense of self-concept through interactions and experiences with others. Through conquering challenges, a variety of skills and a new perspective on life are acquired (Rogers). In this way, society directly influences an individual's self-worth. Rogerian theory purports that

the facilitation of significant learning rests upon certain attitudinal qualities that exist in the personal relationship between facilitator and learner.

The participants in this study are individuals who, despite their learning disabilities, have successfully negotiated the challenges of completing their professional teacher education. Through experiential learning, these participants have tackled obstacles and attained their goals to become educators. This research reveals their stories from their experiences as students through to their experiences on the other side of the desk as classroom teachers.

Importance of the Study

Individuals with disabilities have had a number of challenges that they have overcome in their lives. This group of people should not be overlooked, and their achievements should be celebrated (Bowman & Barr, 2001). Of particular interest here are the misunderstandings around the definition of a learning disability and the misconceptions about the academic difficulties faced by individuals with learning disabilities (Morris, 1988). This study will shed light on the childhood experiences of teachers with learning disabilities who are able to deconstruct their education (Ferri et al., 2001). These teachers understand the impact of a learning disability on a student and are particularly empathetic to a student's needs (Carrington & Brownlee, 2001).

This research might elicit discussions about the nature of special education services in order to support the academic success of students who intend to pursue a profession in education (Riddick, 2003). Teachers with learning disabilities may be inclined to share their experiences with students who have disabilities, thereby

creating positive role models for these individuals (Ferri et al., 2005). In this fashion, teachers with learning disabilities can have a positive impact on their students (Dequette, 2000). Furthermore, teachers with learning disabilities may also serve as an excellent resource for other teachers and parents who are dealing with students with learning disabilities (Ferri et al.).

This research is likely to uncover similar characteristics in the participants that have made them resilient and highlight common strategies that they used to cope with their exceptionalities (Polloway, Schewel, & Patton, 1992). This information is significant in order to comprehend how some individuals with learning disabilities overcome adversity and create positive strategies. Affirmations will result from the discussion of the findings of this study, as teachers with learning disabilities will learn more about how others deal with similar exceptionalities (Ferri et al., 2005).

It is essential for members of society to understand and appreciate the experiences of teachers with learning disabilities (Riddick, 2003). The only way to appreciate what teachers with learning disabilities have gone through and accomplished is to hear it through their own words (Bowman & Barr, 2001; Ferri et al., 2005). Through the voices of the participants, this research clarifies some of the common misunderstandings and misconceptions and celebrates the achievements of teachers with learning disabilities.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

The findings of this research were dependent on the teacher participants' ability to articulate their recollections of their education experiences and reflect on their current practice. This required the participants to devolve information during

the open-ended interviews. Teachers were permitted to decline responses or reserve the right to not elaborate on open-ended questions that elicited emotional responses. These limitations that related to teachers' ability to articulate their perceptions were considered in the discussion of this research.

Data were collected from only 4 teacher participants. These teachers were highly motivated individuals who were all Caucasian and three out of the four participants were from a middle class background. This small sample does not necessarily represent all teachers with learning disabilities. Therefore, it must be noted that although it will be possible for some generalization to be made based on the findings of this study, this research is limited to the teachers in this sample. The population of teachers with learning disabilities who choose to disclose their disability is very limited, as individuals tend to conceal their disability for fear that others will misunderstand them (Valle et al., 2004). The teachers that did consent to participate in this research may be considered to be highly motivated and confident individuals. This group of participants may not necessarily be representative of the population.

Outline of Remainder of the Document

Chapter Two of this document reviews the literature related to individuals with learning disabilities. This review highlights the need for further study on the topic of teachers with learning disabilities. Chapter Three outlines the research methods that were used to conduct this study. This chapter begins with an explanation of the design of the study and a discussion of the pilot study. The selection of the participants and protocols of investigation are also explained.

Chapter Four presents the collected data. These data were interpreted, and these findings have been presented in nine themes. Each theme is supported by illustrative quotes from the participants. Chapter Five is a discussion of the findings along with implications of this study, recommendations for practice, and suggestions for further research on this topic.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This study explored the previous education experiences of 4 teachers with learning disabilities. Reflecting on their childhood recollections, the teachers articulated what it was like growing up with a learning disability. The teachers shared their motivations for choosing teaching as a career and the nature of their current classroom teaching experience. Accordingly, Chapter Two presents a review of the literature on learning disabilities as it relates to the educative experiences of students, adults, teacher candidates, and in-service teachers.

Students with Learning Disabilities

In order for a student to access special education services, identification of a learning disability must be determined through a set of standardized tests administered by a registered psychologist. These assessments compare the student's aptitude and academic achievement to his/her peers and report on developmental level, strengths, weaknesses, and behaviour (Weber & Bennett, 2004). An individual is identified with a learning disability if he or she has an average or above average aptitude score, yet academic achievement scores are 2 years below his/her chronological age. The results from these tests, along with information supplied from the teacher and parents, are then put together to create a report on the student, and the psychologist determines the student's identification (Weber & Bennett). An IPRC (Independent Planning Review Committee) decides on the programming and placement for the student, and an IEP (Individual Education Plan) is created (Bohatyretz & Lipps, 1999).

Individual Education Plans

An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is devised for students who have been identified with special needs. An IEP is a written document that explains the programs, accommodations, modifications, and services that a student will need during the school year (Ministry of Education, 2000). It also contains information about the student such as: date of recent IPRC, grade, subjects or courses to which an IEP applies, medical conditions, and the student's exceptionality. A list of the student's strengths and needs will be written in order to create an appropriate program for the child. The IEP states the academic achievement level of the student, which may differ from the student's chronological placement level (Ministry of Education). The document also contains goals that will be addressed during the school year and a list of the instructional strategies and accommodations for parents and teachers (Ministry of Education). Furthermore, the document clearly outlines motives for the development, specific curricular expectations, special programs or services the student should receive and the techniques used to determine the student's progress (Weber & Bennett, 2004). Thirty days after the student is placed into a special education setting, the IEP must be created, and the principal of the school is responsible to ensure that this happens. The parents must approve of the IEP and be given a copy within 30 days. It is required that a copy of the IEP is put into the student's Ontario School Record (OSR).

Individual Education Plans have been a requirement for students with exceptionalities since 1998 in accordance with Regulation 181/98 of the *Education Act* (Ministry of Education, 2000). It is compulsory for the principal of a school to

make certain that students who are deemed exceptional by the IPRC process each have an IEP created to meet the individual student's needs (Weber & Bennett, 2004). Students who demonstrate extreme difficulties meeting the curriculum expectations, but have not gone through an IPRC, may have an IEP, as they are considered by the school board to need assistance from the special education department. If a student needs resources and specialized equipment from the school, they must have an IEP to receive provincial funding support (Weber & Bennett).

An IEP should be applied daily to the student's educational programming in both regular and special education settings (Ministry of Education, 2000). It is the obligation of the principal of the school to ensure that all educators are adhering to the recommendations made in a student's IEP. The student's progress will be monitored throughout the year to make sure that they are reaching their full potential.

Supports for Students with Learning Disabilities

Elementary students who are on an IEP generally receive assistance from the special education teacher(s) in their school. Some elementary students are placed in a special education resource classroom for a portion of the school day (Ministry of Education, 2000). The program that is delivered to these students is based on their academic achievement levels, which are often a few grades below their chronological grade placement. Alternatively, elementary students may also be withdrawn from their classroom for one period of the day for special education resource assistance that is directed toward one specific academic skill need (Ministry of Education).

Generally, special education resource assistance for students with learning disabilities is delivered in a small group setting so that the teacher can spend more time one-on-one with each individual student (Weber & Bennett, 2004). This support is important for students with learning disabilities, as it helps to build self-confidence in their academic abilities (Ministry of Education, 2000). At the secondary level, students with learning disabilities can receive support from the special education department. Some may also take a class to teach them study skills such as test taking skills (Ministry of Education). A special education teacher generally tracks the students with learning disabilities in their other subjects to ensure that their needs are being met.

With the advancements in technology, students with learning disabilities can use specific equipment and software to assist them in a school or even in their future work setting (Learning Disabilities Association – Peel Region, n.d.). Technology such as a spellchecker, calculators, video cameras, tape recorders, scanners, and editing and notetaking software can improve the quality of life of a student with a learning disability. These devices are especially helpful for students with learning disabilities in areas such as math and language.

Social-Emotional Development of Students with Learning Disabilities

Social-emotional issues are prevalent in students with learning disabilities (Wong, 1996). Compared to their peers, a child or adolescent with a learning disability has a poor self-concept associated to academic achievement. Students with learning disabilities and low academic self-efficacy display less effort in class and feel that school is more challenging compared to students without learning

disabilities (Meltzer et al., 2004). Moreover, students with learning disabilities often attribute good grades to external factors such as luck or a teacher just being kind. Students with learning disabilities often have a difficult time dealing with failure and disappointment (Holdman, 1997). The perceptions of students with learning disabilities and the perceptions of their teachers may create determination in the students to work hard or in some cases perpetrate a negative effort cycle for the student (Meltzer et al.).

There is a relationship between learning disabilities and psychiatric disorders such as anxiety and depression (Sundheim & Voeller, 2004). Students with learning disabilities sometimes have high anxiety (Manassis & Young, 2000). When students are identified with a learning disability, educators should be aware that early diagnosis and treatment of any of these other disorders can help a child or adolescent become a more successful learner.

Students with learning disabilities may have problems moderating their emotions and understanding social situations. It is often the case that a child with a learning disability may act out negatively in class because of frustration (Weber & Young, 2000) or on an impulse (Smith, 1991, cited in Holdman, 1997). Children with learning disabilities who lack empathy often bottle up their emotions (Manassis & Young). Adolescents with learning disabilities often display childish behaviours when dealing with their feelings (Mangrum & Strichart, 1994, cited in Holdman).

Peer Relationships

Yu, Zhang, and Yan (2005) investigated how Chinese children with learning disabilities develop friendships and interact with others. Participants were chosen from a pool of 390 students in grades 4, 5, and 6 who attended a school in Beijing, China. There were 98 participants (34 students with learning disabilities; 64 students without learning disabilities). In China there are no standardized criteria to identify students with learning disabilities; therefore, Yu et al. identified students with learning disabilities as those who had academic achievement considerably lower than their IQ scores. All the participants completed the Chinese version of the *Ravens Intelligence* test, which was compared to students' final exam scores for Chinese literature and mathematics. All participants completed a tailored version of *Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Scale* and the *Peer Nomination Inventory Questionnaire*.

Yu et al. conferenced with 50 families (18 with children with LDs; 32 with children without LDs) that were randomly selected to be interviewed. One member of each participant's family, usually a parent, was interviewed for approximately half an hour, and interviews were audiotaped. Interview questions examined how the families functioned with respect to problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, and behaviour control. Interview data were coded for both positive and negative aspects of family functioning. The scores from the other questionnaires, tests, and final school reports were factored into the analysis.

Yu et al. (2005) found that the children with learning disabilities reported more incidents of being lonely, isolated, and rejected by their peers compared to the students without learning disabilities; not surprisingly, there was also a connection between being rejected by peers and feelings of loneliness. These students with learning disabilities were not liked by some of their peers because of their aggressive behaviours, undesirable personality traits (depression), poor social skills, and low academic abilities. Furthermore, Yu et al. detected a link between families that were high functioning (e.g. educated and socially competent) and levels of peer acceptance among their children. The investigators recommended that teachers help students with learning disabilities, not only academically but also socially.

Wiener and Schneider (2002) sought to determine whether students with learning disabilities have friendships with non-LD children, the type of friends that students with learning disabilities acquire, and whether a child's LD has an impact on his/her ability to create and maintain friendships. In their research, Wiener and Schneider (2002) used 9 different schools in two school boards near Toronto, Canada. The participants with learning disabilities had been identified prior to the study and were diagnosed by a psychologist in their school board.

The participants included 232 students from grades 4-8: 117 students with learning disabilities (50 females; 67 males) and 115 students without learning disabilities (47 females; 68 males) who were matched by grade and gender. All of the students (both LD and non-LD) completed the *Academic Competence Scale of the Social Skills Rating System* (Wiener & Schneider, 2002). Only the students who achieved average or above-average scores on this scale were included in the study

(Wiener & Schneider). The participants without LDs were randomly chosen from a group of students who were willing to be involved in the study (Weiner & Schneider).

Sixty-two percent of the participants with LDs spent the majority of their day in regular classrooms and they were withdrawn daily for approximately 30-90 minutes to receive support from the special education teacher. Another 20% of the participants with LDs spent half of their school day in a special education program and attended a regular classroom for subjects such as art, music, or gym. For the rest of the students with LDs, 18% were in a regular classroom for the entire school day with both a classroom and special education teacher.

In accordance with the *Blishen Scale*, students' socioeconomic backgrounds were compared. For the participants without LDs, 19% were low SES, 55% were middle SES, and 26% were high SES. In comparison, for the students with LDs, 31% were low SES, 55% were middle SES, and 14% were high SES. Based on the fact that there was considerable diversity in the SES background of the participants, Wiener and Schneider (2002) used socioeconomic status scores as a covariate for comparisons between the two groups.

All of the participants' parents were interviewed, and their teachers filled out questionnaires. Wiener and Schneider (2002) found that males with learning disabilities had fewer friends by comparison with the other males without learning disabilities in this study. The group of students with learning disabilities had more friends with learning problems than did the participants without learning disabilities. Also, the children with learning disabilities had more friends that were

younger than them and fewer friends of the same age. The males with learning disabilities had more friends that were outside of their school cohort than any of the other groups of students (Weiner & Schneider). The students with learning disabilities had less stability and more conflict in their friendships. In particular, these students with learning disabilities felt that their very close friends were not entirely supportive of them. The findings of this study highlight the need for children with learning disabilities to receive social skills support in order to create and maintain positive friendships.

Often students with learning disabilities have difficulty making friends and have issues with problem solving in small or in large groups (Wong, 1996). As a result, they find it hard to work with others (Smith, 1991; Straughn, 1988, cited in Holdman, 1997). Consequently, peer relations in the classroom are fraught with instability and conflict (Wiener & Schneider, 2002). Peer-mediated intervention can train students with learning disabilities to interact appropriately with peers. In this intervention, nonlearning disabled students work with learning disabled students; this is an interaction between peers that is nonartificial (Peck, Sasso, Jolivet et al., 1997, cited in Moore, 2005). As a result, improvement in the social interaction of students with learning disabilities is natural and more likely to be sustained over time. Further, when students with learning disabilities are exposed to a variety of peer mediators instead of an individual peer, then it increases their chances of improving and maintaining their social skills (Goldstein, English, Shafer, Kaczmarek, 1997, cited in Moore).

Adults with Learning Disabilities

Similar to students with learning disabilities, some adults with learning disabilities may have inappropriate social skills (Moore, 2005) and have a difficult time making and retaining friendships (Adelman & Vogel, 1991, cited in Wong, 1996) and tendencies to experience depression (Manassis & Young). Research that has been done with adults with learning disabilities has attempted to determine their coping mechanisms, positive role models, and influential school experiences (Manassis & Young, 2000). Researchers have concluded that several individuals with learning disabilities, in comparison to their peers, have fewer friendships (McConkey, 1983; De Knock, Felce, Saxby, & Thomas, 1985, cited in Moore).

There is a lack of research that focuses attention on the ability of adults with learning disabilities to refine their skills to create and develop positive relationships. Adults with learning disabilities noted that they had learned coping strategies to deal with their disabilities and to use their strengths to compensate for their weaknesses (Polloway, et al., 1992). As children, the majority of adults with learning disabilities had a positive influence in their life, such as a person or activity, which helped their self-esteem and self-confidence. Yet, the participants all reported some sort of negative school experience. Family members were crucial supports in helping these adults with learning disabilities overcome obstacles (Polloway et al.). The recollections of adults with learning disabilities can provide useful information about students with learning disabilities. These experiences may provide educators with social skills and coping strategies to assist students with learning disabilities.

Some people believe that success is achieved when a person knows and accepts who they are (Pollack, 1994, cited in Henry, 1999). It is likely that if a person with a learning disability has achieved some degree of success, they have faced many challenges and have been victorious (Henry). There are a few studies that have looked at the factors that contribute to the success of individuals with learning disabilities (Holdman, 1997). An individual with a learning disability can thrive if they have a positive attitude, are motivated, and believe in their own abilities. Individuals with learning disabilities can overcome their deficits when they embrace their learning disability, recognize their weaknesses, and utilize their strengths (Roffman, Herzog, & Wershaba-Gershon, 1994, cited in Holdman). Individuals with learning disabilities are successful when they possess determination, have a goal, and accept their disability (Gerber, Ginsberg & Reiff, 1992, cited in Holdman). Moreover, individuals with learning disabilities who are successful take responsibility for their behaviour and acknowledge that they can positively influence their situation (Bandura, 1986 cited in Henry).

Other professionals believe that a person with a learning disability can achieve success if they ask others for help and have support from family and friends (Holdman, 1997). In particular, a positive relationship with parents will have an impact on a student's success (Henry, 1999), and individuals with learning disabilities that are successful had teachers who believed in their abilities (Wiener, 1987, cited in Henry). Furthermore, the majority of students with learning disabilities who achieve their goals do not give up easily and surround themselves with others with similar drive and determination (Gerber, 1992, cited in Holdman).

Teachers with Learning Disabilities

This section will review the literature related to teacher candidates and in-service teachers with learning disabilities. There will be a discussion of the issues of disclosure of a learning disability and the challenges which teachers with learning disabilities face in the classroom. This is a fairly recent and scarcely published area of literature. It should be noted that prior to this literature being published, a number of practices have become passé.

Teacher Education and Teacher Candidates with Learning Disabilities

Individuals with learning disabilities are entering into teacher preparation programs in increasing numbers (Dequette, 2000). Despite the reality that individuals with exceptionalities are looked down upon by society, educational institutions tend to be supportive of these individuals (Bowman & Barr, 2001). As an illustration, young adults with exceptionalities were tracked throughout their undergraduate and subsequent employment experiences in education (Bowman & Barr). In general, their schools created a community of support for these individuals with exceptionalities (Bowman & Barr).

It is essential that individuals with learning disabilities who enter teacher education should make their advisors aware of their learning disabilities in order to guarantee accommodations during field placements. At times, however, even accommodations are not enough to ensure teacher candidates' success in teaching practice. Gilbert (1998) followed a female teacher candidate with a learning disability during her practica placement in order to document this individual's experiences and challenges. This research also focused on the issues that the teacher

education programs faced, such as the demands to raise academic standards and providing support for individuals with learning disabilities. The participant did not disclose her learning disability to anyone other than the researcher because she was afraid that others would treat her differently if they were aware of her exceptionality. However she was willing to participate in this study because she did not want other students with learning disabilities to experience what she had gone through.

Data were collected during the teacher candidate's first 8-week field placement. The teacher candidate had a placement in a special education classroom. She was evaluated on her abilities to create and deliver lessons based on students' IEPs, respond to students' needs, grading, record keeping, and understanding various evaluations. Interviews with the participant's advisors, school principal, and two students were conducted. Observations of the teacher candidate's lessons, lesson plans, and field placement written reports were made. The teacher candidate received a "C" on her first field placement, and her last two placements were below standard performance. The data were coded and collapsed into four themes that related to confidentiality, ethical problems, training problems, and legal problems.

Despite the fact that the teacher candidate was given accommodations during her placements, she was still unable to demonstrate minimal teaching competencies (Gilbert, 1998). In fact, her identification worked against her, as one mentor teacher gave her a passing grade because she had a learning disability and he felt that she had improved, despite the fact that she did not meet all the criteria.

Based on the findings of this study, Gilbert (1998) recommends that teacher candidates with learning disabilities should be held to the same standards as other teachers. Furthermore, each teacher candidate with a learning disability should be evaluated on an individual basis, because not all will be successful in teacher education programs (Gilbert).

Teacher candidates with learning disabilities tend to be underserved with respect to professional development and support. For example, recent findings (Gale, 2000) point out that in Australian universities, there are a number of students with learning disabilities in teacher education programs without adequate support. These individuals are at risk of failing their courses, not because they are not capable, but because of the lack of support from their institutions. These restrictions may hamper candidates' chances of successfully completing teacher education programs and entering into the profession. Gale feels that it is important for teacher candidates to be aware of their exceptionalities, including their strengths and weaknesses, in order to self-advocate. Also, universities need to educate their professors on various ways to engage learners with disabilities and provide accommodations and modifications for them.

The life stories of teacher candidates with exceptionalities are poignant illustrations of resiliency. Gabel (2001) examined 3 teacher candidates with exceptionalities and looked at how they understood themselves and learned from their experiences. Over the course of their teacher education year, this research documented their feelings about their exceptionalities, their relationships with their students, and how their experiences as students influenced their teaching

philosophies (Gabel). The teacher candidates in Gabel's study desired to give their students positive school experiences that drastically differed from their own educative experiences. All of the teacher candidates felt a desire to share their experiences with their students, especially the ones who were struggling academically. Gabel's study highlights the value of including the personal narratives of students and teachers with exceptionalities in teacher education courses.

In an effort to better understand the experiences of teacher candidates with learning disabilities and how their perceptions of their disability affect their teaching abilities, Holdman (1997) studied 3 teacher candidates, 2 females and 1 male, from different universities. Data were collected through interviews in which the participants discussed their teaching experiences and through reflective journals (Holdman). The participants' IEP documents were reviewed, and their teacher advisors were interviewed.

The findings revealed that the teacher candidates all felt anxious at the start and end of their placements. The three teacher candidates had high ambitions for themselves. The teacher candidates were very determined to attain their set goals and felt that they needed to show others they were capable teachers (Holdman, 1997). They regarded the support of others as vital in helping them achieve their goals. In particular, they believed that they were successful because of the support they received from their families (Holdman). These teacher candidates refused to disclose their learning disabilities to their placement teachers out of fear that it would create a negative stigma. The teacher candidates with learning disabilities

perceived that they had to work harder than their peers. All of the teacher candidates felt that they were compassionate to students who were struggling academically. All of the participants perceived that their learning disabilities had a negative impact on their self-esteem and affected their confidence in their academic abilities, but the teacher candidates were careful not to associate their learning disability to their teaching performance (Holdman).

Despite some affirmations, these teacher candidates with learning disabilities still perceived that there were stereotypical barriers in the education environment. It is imperative that postsecondary educators understand the importance of creating a supportive environment for students with learning disabilities. It is important for individuals with learning disabilities to self-advocate in order to obtain the warranted accommodations and support (Holdman, 1997).

At Canadian universities, Dequette (2000) examined the experiences of 4 teacher candidates (2 males and 2 females). Three of the participants had learning disabilities among other exceptionalities (low vision, physical disabilities). Data were documented through an open-ended questionnaire, semistructured interviews, and observations. The questionnaire allowed Dequette to see what type of assistance participants required during their placements. During the interviews, teacher candidates were asked to recall past schooling experiences, comment on the accommodations that they required and the support they had received, and reflect on their teaching experiences. Dequette observed participants during their last placement, noting the teacher candidates' actions and words while implementing

lessons. During the interviews, the participants commented on their teaching experiences.

The findings indicated that the teacher candidates had a number of common circumstances (Dequette, 2000). They had negative incidents in elementary and secondary school, and consequently they did not use the same teaching methods that they were taught with as students. In particular, the participants' elementary experiences were fraught with embarrassment about their exceptionalities and a lack of confidence in their academic abilities.

The teacher candidates noted that their families were instrumental in terms of support of (or lack of support of) their educational activities (Dequette, 2000). Some of the teacher candidate participants did not receive any academic help at home or emotional support from their parents, while others had parents who encouraged and helped them to achieve their full potential. The teacher candidates believed that their accomplishments were linked to certain personality traits, and they acknowledged openly their exceptionalities.

All of the participants' previous education and work experiences created a desire in them to become teachers (Dequette, 2000). These teacher candidates had previous jobs that complemented their strengths and contributed to their confidence in their abilities to pursue teacher education. During their practica, the teacher candidates with learning disabilities did not receive any accommodations. They carefully observed their mentor teachers and included some of the teaching methods that they saw into their own practice. During the teacher candidates' placements

they used methods that they had found effective as students (e.g., verbal instructions, hands-on experiences).

The teacher candidates' experiences impacted their teaching philosophies. Two of the teacher candidates confessed that they wanted to become teachers to ensure that students with exceptionalities did not encounter similar negative experiences in school as they had experienced when they were in school. Participants desired to give students who were struggling academically the support that they did not receive. The teacher candidates had the ability to encourage and motivate the weaker students in their classrooms. All of the teacher candidates wanted to ensure that the students with exceptionalities would have the opportunity to have a successful educational experience (Dequette, 2000).

Overall, the teacher candidates were successful in their teacher education programs because they were aware of their own needs and they accepted their exceptionalities (Dequette, 2000). These teacher candidates possessed characteristics that allowed them to overcome obstacles and attain their goal to become teachers. Although the participants had negative school experiences, they were able to use these experiences and became confident and successful teachers. These teacher candidates' narratives provided data that can be used to increase the success of students with exceptionalities.

Riddick (2003) investigated the experiences of 13 teacher candidates with dyslexia with respect to how their challenges affected the way they taught their students. This research was in response to the negative attitudes of some teacher education programs with respect to teacher candidates with dyslexia. Interviews



were completed with the participants about their school experiences, coping techniques, desires to become teachers, positive and negative aspects of having dyslexia, their interpretations of literacy standards, and teacher education.

Riddick (2003) discovered that out of the 5 participants in teacher education, only 2 disclosed their exceptionalities to their university. The other teacher candidates did not reveal their exceptionalities because they were afraid of potential repercussions. Virtually all of the teacher candidates with dyslexia stated that their primary and secondary school experiences were negative. The participants felt that their negative school experiences were related to their struggles with reading and writing skills. Several of the participants reported that when they were younger, their teachers underestimated them because of their disabilities. As a result, the participants felt they were able to understand students with special needs in their class (Riddick).

Participants with learning disabilities have valuable insights which can be useful when setting up special education programs. It is necessary to create a supportive environment for teachers with learning disabilities and allow them to disclose their disabilities to other students, therefore creating positive role models (Riddick, 2003).

In-Service Teachers with Learning Disabilities

It has only recently been the case that studies have been done to document the experience of teachers with learning disabilities (Valle et al., 2004). Teachers with learning disabilities are a unique group of individuals because they are able to draw on their own childhood experiences and use these experiences to develop a

professional relationship and positive learning environment for their students with learning disabilities (Ferri et al., 2005). Individuals with learning disabilities are being encouraged to be in the field of education as teachers. Many of these individuals have demonstrated that they work extremely well with students who struggle or have special needs (Dequette, 2000). As well, teachers with exceptionalities are affirmed as positive role models for other teachers and students.

The experiences of individuals with learning disabilities are best understood through their personal stories (Ferri et al., 2005). Each individual with an LD has a unique view which is beneficial to other education professionals (Gilbert, 1998). Through sharing these experiences with others, students, teachers, and policy makers benefit from an authentic account (Ferri et al., 2001). Individuals with learning disabilities are often fighting against misconceptions and ignorance (Ferri et al., 2005). Therefore, it is imperative that their stories are heard in order to break down the stereotypes surrounding learning disabilities (Ferri et al., 2005).

Ferri, et al. (2001) sought to determine if the special education support received as children affected the way the teachers with learning disabilities delivered instruction to students with learning disabilities. Three participants (1 female and 2 males) were previously identified with a learning disability and had assistance from the special education department at some point in their educational experiences. Now, as teachers, participants were working with students who were identified with learning disabilities. Ferri et al. interviewed the participants, and themes emerged that related to how these teachers conceptualized their learning disability.

The participants believed that their teaching practices were affected by the negative way that they were treated as children (Ferri et al., 2001). As children, the participants were afraid to expose their disability out of shame, and they recalled feeling lonely and discriminated against. The participants perceived that when they were in school their teachers did not have high academic expectations for them. They believed that their teachers sought to ensure that they were provided with appropriate accommodations and modifications; yet they did not regard their educative experiences as being effective (Ferri et al.). Now, as teachers, they frequently shared their experiences with their students in order to encourage them and to serve as role models (Ferri et al.). Based on their experiences, the participants realized the importance of teaching learning strategies and self-advocacy skills to their students (Ferri et al.). Overall, these teachers with learning disabilities were able to identify and relate to their students on a very unique level.

Teachers with learning disabilities often hold distinct definitions of success and articulate how their previous experiences have shaped their teaching philosophies (Henry, 1999). The teachers with learning disabilities in a study by Henry defined success as reaching their goal of becoming a teacher. Henry looked at 4 female teachers; 3 taught elementary and 1 worked in junior high. All participants were in their early 30s and their experience varied from 6 to 8 years. They were all currently teaching special education. All of the teachers were diagnosed with dyslexia, and accordingly, they had difficulties in the areas of reading, spelling, writing and oral expression (Henry). As children, all of the participants received support from the special education department during their

educational career. During semistructured interviews the participants described their experiences with respect to how their exceptionality affected their teaching philosophies, how they had achieved success, and how their learning disability impacted their success.

The participants attributed their success to the positive relationships they had with their parents, who were closely involved in their academic life (Henry, 1999). These teachers did believe that, as students, goals were set for them that were achievable, and this contributed to their positive self-esteem. Yet there were others who doubted their abilities, and many of the participants had a strong desire to be successful in order to prove themselves (Henry). These participants chose their profession because of a negative experience with a teacher from their past. These incidents also helped the teachers to create their teaching philosophy and to become more sensitive to students with special needs in their classrooms (Henry). The participants disclosed their disabilities to their students as an example in order to teach their students how to overcome obstacles.

Challenges Faced by Teachers with Learning Disabilities

Throughout their lives, teachers with learning disabilities have had to express their needs to obtain appropriate accommodation for themselves (Papalia-Berardi, Hughes, & Papalia, 2002). Yet, teachers with learning disabilities are faced with a number of potential challenges that stem from disclosing their disability to their school board, colleagues, parents, and students (Valle et al., 2004). This dilemma of whether to disclose a learning disability is one that is very difficult for many teachers with learning disabilities to deal with. Valle et al. (2004) investigated the

reasons that teachers with learning disabilities reveal their disabilities to others. The study focused on 4 participants, 3 males and 1 female. All the participants were identified with a learning disability when they were younger. The participants were distinctly different in age and experience and were from various social economical backgrounds and ethnicities. Each participant was interviewed three times about their experiences being a teacher with a learning disability. Then all participants came together for a focus group discussion about the findings. During this session, participants talked about their exceptionality in different ways, and this was documented by Valle et al.

The participants' personal stories describe their circumstances and the decisions that they made with respect to disclosing their LD (Valle et al., 2004). Many of the participants revealed that they did not disclose their disability to colleagues for fear that they would be rejected or their abilities would be questioned. This group of teachers perceived that if others were aware of their learning disabilities, they would no longer be seen or treated as "normal." Teachers with learning disabilities fear rejection and misunderstanding, and some hide their disability and remain silent (Valle et al.). The decision to disclose a learning disability is a choice that is affected by numerous personal factors such as age, socioeconomic status, and life experiences (Valle et al.). These factors will be discussed further in chapter four, presentation of the results. Valle et al. concluded that it is imperative to understand the consequences that a label of learning disabled has for both teachers and students.

There is a societal expectation that those who teach should be academically exemplary (Holdman, 1997). This perpetuates negative attitudes towards individuals with learning disabilities who choose a career in teaching (Henry, 1999). Ferri et al. (2005) looked at 4 teachers (3 males and 1 female) who were identified with learning disabilities at different periods in their life. The participants varied in age, race, ethnicity, social economical background, and teaching experiences. Participants were interviewed individually and participated in a focus group discussion. The majority of their comments related to how they deal with the attitudes of others and society as a whole. These teachers with learning disabilities discussed how difficult it is for others to understanding their learning disability and their personal and professional experiences teaching students with learning disabilities.

The narratives of these teachers revealed that for each there was a turning point in their life when they came to accept their learning disability (Ferri et al., 2005). Yet, not all of the participants chose to disclose their learning disabilities in their professional or academic lives because of the perceived risks. Ferri, et al., found that there were few incidents of individuals with learning disabilities who were portrayed positively in the media, and as a result there were negative attitudes with respect to teachers with learning disabilities. The participants felt that there should be an increase in the amount of people with learning disabilities in the media because it might give others the message that they are not alone.

Ferri et al. (2005) believed that the participants' experiences offered them insights into students who had learning disabilities and as a result allowed them to

set goals and strategies which suited the needs of their students with learning disabilities. Ferri et al. believed that the participants' stories illustrated the need for change in the special education field and for educators to self assess daily their teaching practices and philosophies.

In some cases, knowledge of a teacher's learning disability does set up certain performance expectations. Reilly, et al. (1998) examined individuals' perceptions of teachers with visible and invisible exceptionalities. Eighty-seven undergraduate students (35 males and 52 females) evaluated videotaped history lessons of nondisabled teachers as well as teachers with physical and learning disabilities. Prior to watching the video researchers told the participants if the teacher in the video had a learning disability. Then the participants rated the lecture with respect to delivery, organization, content, connection with students, and teacher's confidence.

The results indicated that in comparison to the other teachers, the teachers with learning disabilities received lower evaluations than the teachers with physical disabilities (Reilly et al., 1998). The undergraduate students rationalized that a learning disability was not a justifiable reason for poor teaching performance. The data also indicated that the participants believed that the teacher with a physical exceptionality was more conscientious than the teacher with a learning disability. The results also showed that the participants were more empathic towards the teacher with a physical exceptionality in comparison to the teacher with a learning disability (Reilly et al.). Furthermore, the participants felt that a learning disability was not a justifiable exceptionality.

Because of the social stigma, some teachers with learning disabilities do not actively seek support from their colleagues (Ferri et al., 2005). Beginning teachers with learning disabilities are especially challenged because it might be difficult to rally support from their coworkers in their areas of weakness (e.g., editing, organizational skills). As a result, these teachers with learning disabilities might question their teaching abilities. These teachers with learning disabilities need support through their educational and professional career (Dequette, 2000). Yet, the reality is that the needs of teachers with learning disabilities are often not attended to by educational institutions (Valle et al., 2004), and there are usually no formal mandates in place to help individuals with learning disabilities become teachers (Henry, 1999). Despite these challenges, there are success stories of teachers with learning disabilities, and it is important to understand how teachers with learning disabilities succeed when they are faced with numerous obstacles. In this way, by making their stories public, their invisible disability becomes visible, and we can take a closer look at the experiences of teachers with learning disabilities. Through sharing their experiences and how they have overcome challenges, teachers with learning disabilities may serve as an inspiration to students with learning disabilities (Valle et al., 2004). Beyond this, the experiences of teachers with learning disabilities can inform special education programs for students (Ferri et al., 2001). Teachers with learning disabilities can also help professionals and parents understand the obstacles faced by students with learning disabilities. This current research will seek to inform some of these potential implications.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter outlines the methods and procedures that were used in this research. A description of participant selection, instrumentation, collection of data, proposed analysis of data, and presentation of findings will be established in this chapter.

Research Design

The purpose of the study was to present the stories of individuals with learning disabilities as students and as teachers. In order to fully appreciate each of these stories, the participants' experiences must be shared and re-presented (Ferri et al., 2005). In the tradition of qualitative inquiry, case study methods were used to tell these stories and describe the issues, the participants, their experiences, and what is learned (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Case study research may consist of a single case (an individual) or of multiple sites or cases within the same study (Merriam, 1998). When more than one case is studied, it is a collective case study. Case study methods present the experiences of the participants through interviewing methods and analyses of their documents (Creswell, 1998). Meaning is extracted from data that outline what was experienced and how it was experienced (Creswell).

Selection of Participants and Site

In this study, 4 participants were selected through purposive sampling. In order to obtain my participants I used several different recruitment methods. In one of my graduate classes, I presented my study outlining the participants that I was interested in for my research. After class, one of the students informed me that she



knew a female teacher who was identified with a learning disability and went through the teacher education program. A few days later, this individual contacted me and desired more information about my research. She was willing to participate in my research. During the same presentation, a female graduate student publicly announced to the entire class that she fit the description of my participants and was willing to join my research.

My advisor teaches in the preservice education department, and during a discussion of her graduate students' work in studies of teachers with learning disabilities, after class and in private, a few of her students indicated how this topic of research resonated with them. Two students, a male and a female, were interested in the topic of my research. These 2 participants communicated with me for a description of my research and the time commitment involved, and as a result they both agreed to be part of my study.

Description of Participants

Four certified teachers with learning disabilities were the sample population for this study. These individuals were a homogenous sample because they have common defining characteristics. As well, this was a purposive sample, because I used extreme case sampling, as the participants represent a small percentage of the population. All of the participants have had psychoeducational assessments and received some special education support during schooling. Coincidentally, 3 participants (Olivia, Alex, and Nicky) all teach for the same large metropolitan school board; however, these 3 participants did not know one another. Marie works in a small school board in central southern Ontario.

Prior to commencement of the research, the potential participants received a letter of invitation. If the teachers chose to participate in the study, then they were sent a consent form by e-mail for them to sign. The participants were then contacted through e-mail to set up a date and time for an interview. In order to protect the participants' identities, they were given pseudonyms. All names mentioned throughout the study are pseudonyms.

The participants were encouraged to choose a location where they wished to be interviewed in confidence. Because of weather conditions and distance, I interviewed Marie over the telephone; however I did tape-record this interview. The researcher accommodated the participants' request for an interview site in order to obtain privacy and comfort for them. When I first met the participants, I explained my interest in the topic, and I fully disclosed that I was a teacher with a learning disability. I believe that this built a trust between the participants and me because I was divulging personal information.

Alex

The first participant, Alex, was in his mid-20s and has been teaching for 2 years. During his teaching career he has taught grade 2 for a large metropolitan school board. Alex was diagnosed with a learning disability when he was in grade 2, with additional effects on his auditory processing skills. However, Alex was unaware of his identification until he was 18 years old. Alex did receive some support from the special education room when he was in elementary school. He does not remember any of his schoolwork being modified for him, but he was exempted from French. Alex went to two high schools and did not receive special



education assistance in his first high school but received support for a year in his second high school. When Alex went to university, he obtained assistance from the student services resource center, but he did not acquire help when he was in the teacher education program. Alex completed a 4-year degree in Kinesiology with elective courses in disability studies in Physical Education. Alex plans to take Additional Qualifications courses in special education and primary and junior mathematics instruction methods.

Nicky

Nicky, the second participant, was also in her mid-20s. She has been teaching for 2 years in a large metropolitan school. In her first year, she taught junior and senior kindergarten; currently she is teaching grade 3. Nicky was 18 years old when she was first identified as gifted with a learning disability. She requested her own psychoeducational assessment. Her learning disability affected her language and auditory processing skills. Nicky obtained a 4-year degree in Sociology and Cultural Studies with a focus in film and media studies. In university, she was also identified as ADD, with her average on-task attention span of approximately 20 minutes. Nicky started to receive accommodations when she entered university and often was a research participant for new technology. Nicky did not request any assistance during her teacher education program and does not ask her employer for accommodations or modifications. For Additional Qualifications courses, Nicky has completed introductory special education and computers.

Marie

The third participant, Marie, is in her early 30s and has been teaching for 9 years. She started her teaching career in high school and now teaches junior and senior kindergarten within a small school board. When Marie was 18 she requested a psychoeducational assessment and was identified with a learning disability that affects her reading ability. Marie received limited accommodations in her university career. Marie completed a 4-year degree in Applied Arts with a specialist in technology. She is currently enrolled in a Master of Education program. She did not receive any support in her teacher education program or during her graduate master's studies or in her current teaching position.

Olivia

Olivia, the fourth participant, is in her late 30s and currently in her first year of teaching. She is in a contract position in a grade 2/3 classroom in a large metropolitan school board. Olivia was identified with a learning disability when she was in grade 2 but did not remember her assessments. Olivia was withdrawn from class during elementary school but refused special education help after grade 6. Olivia believed that she suppressed her awareness of diagnosis until a teacher informed her of her identification when she was 18 years old. Despite the fact that Olivia was the only participant that came from a low socioeconomic demographic, she went to college and completed a Child and Youth Work diploma. She did not receive any special educational assistance. Olivia transferred some of her college credits and finished a 4-year university degree in Child in Youth Work. Only in university did Olivia acquire assistance from the student services resource center.



When Olivia was in the teacher education program she did not identify herself as learning disabled or receive any support from the student services department. Olivia has taken Additional Qualifications special education and junior division education methods. She plans to take subsequent courses in junior division education methods.

Instrumentation

The interview protocol (see Appendix A) was created with the intent to appeal to the research questions and to capture the participants' perceptions of their experiences as students and as teachers. The interview questions were open-ended and semistructured. The interview protocol questions attempted to elicit discussion about the participants' personal and professional experiences dealing with learning disabilities. The initial questions attempted to encourage the participants to discuss their elementary school experiences and establish a relationship between the participants and interviewer. Because I had fully disclosed my learning disability to the participants, I perceived that they were comfortable responding to questions which could be considered sensitive. The questions also focused on accommodations the participants had received when they were students, career choices, and the impact of their learning disability on who they are today.

The interview protocol was adapted from a protocol used in a pilot study that was conducted with an Educational Assistant (Kitchura, 2006). Two other graduate students who are also classroom teachers and my advisor validated the modified version of the interview protocol. This validation process included discussion about the implied meanings of the questions and potential misinterpretations. Interview

questions were also re-words slightly to be more open-ended. These suggestions were incorporated into the current iteration. Their suggestions were incorporated into the current iteration.

Data Collection

Participants brought documents such as their psychoeducational assessments and Individual Education Plans to the first interview and referred to these documents as memory prompts. Prior to meeting for the interviews, the investigator sent a copy of the interview protocol to the participants. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were audiotaped. The researcher transcribed all of the interviews and reviewed all of the transcriptions while listening to the audiotapes to ensure accuracy. Fieldnotes were taken during the interviews, such as noting the time, date, and setting of the interview as well as the nonverbal cues of the participants. This data was viewed holistically and not cited specifically in the findings.

Data Analysis

After the researcher transcribed the participants' interviews, they were read several times to detect common themes. Coding began by separating the data into categories and identifying or naming the categories. Categories were compared for similarities, differences, and connections (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Once the categories had been reexamined to determine how they were connected, the data were presented and clustered into common units of meaning or themes. The themes represent the key reoccurring categories that the majority of the participants articulated in their responses. There are nine themes that encapsulate the



participants' experiences. The themes have been articulated in the form of a narrative (Creswell, 1998). This narrative description outlines the perspectives and experience of the participants. The findings are discussed in Chapter Four, and the discussion and implications of these findings are presented in Chapter Five.

Member Checking

The participants received a copy of their interview transcriptions in order to verify accuracy. I then asked the participants for clarification of selected responses through e-mail. Once the data were clustered and articulated into themes, these interpretations were provided to the participants for verification. Direct quotes from the participants were extracted, and the findings were connected to existing literature. After the findings were compiled, the conclusions from this study were further validated through the process of member checking. All participants received a feedback letter along with the findings and conclusions in a formal report.

Ethical Considerations

The Brock University Research Ethics Board granted permission to conduct this study (see Appendix B, file number 06-005). The informed consent clearly included the purpose, data collection methods, benefits, and understandings that the participants agreed to. Furthermore, each participant was aware that that he/she was able to withdraw from the study at any time. The participants' identities and all of the information collected were kept in confidence.

Limitations

The questions that I asked required participants to recall information about their childhood experiences. However, this process could have been difficult for

some participants because of memory deficits or memory decay. In some of their responses, participants discussed the impact that family members, peers, and colleagues had on their lives. This information may be viewed as biased, as it was only from their perspectives (and did not include the perspectives of the individuals that they referred to). Furthermore, in the participants' responses, important information or critical events might have been inadvertently omitted that could have affected the results of the research. As well, this research topic is highly emotional and may have affected the participants' answers. The participants were highly motivated individuals; this is a select population of individuals with learning disabilities, and therefore we can gain valuable insights through the findings of this research.

The findings as related to 1 participant could be affected by the fact that she was interviewed over the telephone instead of face-to-face. I could not take note of the participant's mannerism during the interview. I felt that the participant and I did not have the same rapport as I did with the other participants because of the lack of physical contact. This could have affected her responses to the questions. This is an important distinction, given the sensitive nature of the topic under investigation. Consequently, there is not the same level of confidence in the findings as articulated by this particular participant.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

The purpose of this research was to give a voice to a group of individuals whose exceptionality is invisible; this was their opportunity to share their stories and experiences through case study. It is imperative to share the findings of this research with the public in order to reduce the stereotypes that surround teaching professionals with learning disabilities. This study was guided by the following research questions: (a) What are the previous educational experiences of teachers with learning disabilities? (b) How do previous educative experiences influence their teaching of students with learning disabilities? (c) What are the barriers for teachers with learning disabilities? (d) What are the strategies or supports that assist these teachers in their practice?

Four experienced teachers with learning disabilities were selected as participants in this study. The participants were a purposive sample, as they all held teaching degrees and were teachers with a learning disability. Each participant was individually interviewed at their convenience. All interviews were audiotaped, and the researcher transcribed the tapes. Copies of the transcriptions were sent to each of the participants to check for accuracy. During the data analysis phase, the researcher contacted the participants through e-mail when it was necessary to obtain additional information or clarification. The researcher coded the participants' responses and collapsed the codes into common themes.

The nine themes offer a recollection of the participants' previous school experiences and insights as to how they perceive that these experiences have influenced their current teaching. In particular, the final three themes describe the

barriers and strategies that these participants experience in their careers as teachers. During the interviews all of the participants talked about their “Perspectives on School Experiences” and the “Identification and Effective Accommodations” that they had received during school. All of the participants shared their recollections of feeling “Isolation, Frustration, and Support” with respect to being a student with a learning disability. A common theme among all of the participants was the “Awareness of their Learning Disability at Age 18.” The participants all recalled and discussed the parameters and conditions around “Disclosure of their Learning Disability” and the “Negative Impact of the ‘Learning Disability’ Label.” Despite the inherent challenges of a learning disability, each of the participants stated their “Desire, Drive, and Obstacles” in becoming a teacher. The educators revealed how their learning disabilities impacted their sense of self. They believed that this contributed to their “Empathy, Compassion, and Self-Concept” support for their students with exceptionalities. Last, in their respective schools, several participants discussed their perspectives and “Critical Views of Colleagues.” These nine themes are presented as findings in narrative form.

Perspectives on School Experiences

Three of the 4 participants talked about their previous educational experiences in elementary school in a positive manner. Most of the participants’ elementary school experiences were fun and a social time in their lives. Marie and Nicky especially enjoyed elementary school, but for very different reasons. Marie enjoyed the academic part of elementary school: “I actually had straight As all the way through elementary school” (Marie, January 30th, 2007), whereas Nicky loved

elementary school because it gave her opportunity to learn, socially interact with her peers, and be involved in extracurricular activities: “I love learning! I remember being involved and everything!” (Nicky, January 27th, 2007).

In elementary school, Alex enjoyed being withdrawn from class in order to receive support:

I didn’t mind it [withdrawal] because there were other kids in the class too that went down to the resource room. I was okay with that. I got a chance to finish my work, so that meant less homework. I did not mind it. (Alex, January 21st 2007)

In general, Olivia liked learning and the social aspects of elementary and secondary school but did not enjoy the academic part: “I liked to experience new things, but I didn’t like academic [aspects]. I didn’t like tests. I didn’t like the idea of how things [in the classroom] worked, sitting for long periods” (Olivia, February 7th, 2007). When Olivia turned 30 she went back to university. She reflected, “I hated high school! I hated elementary school, and I didn’t like college... but I loved university” (Olivia, February 7th, 2007). She admits that she did not do well in elementary and secondary school and was a bully: “I remember doing awful things that I would have been suspended for if the system back then worked like it does today. They were mean, aggressive, hurtful things” (Olivia, February 7th, 2007). Olivia admits that academically she did not try, and she feels that the reason she passed numerous courses in high school and college was because of her character: “I just failed through things. I could really talk a good game” (Olivia, February 7th, 2007). The majority of Olivia’s teachers liked her because she did do a lot of

volunteer work with children who were at risk in her own community: “I did a lot of good in some areas. I started working with children when I was 14. I did a lot of good social things, but academically I didn’t do very much!” (Olivia, February 7th, 2007).

Even though Marie, Nicky, and Alex all enjoyed elementary school, they did not favour high school because the academic level increased in difficulty. For example, Marie stated:

It was an incredibly frustrating experience being bogged down with work.

Language was only one subject; I had to contend with Geography, History,

Law. It tended to become quite a bit of a burden. I knew that there was

something wrong [with me], I was constantly working more than anybody else seemed to be working. (Marie, January 30th, 2007)

Both Nicky and Marie did not acquire assistance because they were not identified with a learning disability until the end of their high school career. Even then, Nicky obtained only a little support at the end of her high school career. When Marie was 16 years old, she left her high school to attend an art school in a large city. In the mornings, her new high school followed the traditional curriculum, and in the afternoon it was focused around the arts. This environment was more conducive to Marie’s learning, and as a result she became more confident in her abilities and enjoyed going to school: “I wouldn’t have survived high school if I had not been in this type of system, and it was at that school that I was tested [for a learning disability]” (Marie, January 30th, 2007). She credits this school for “saving her” from academic failure and identifying her exceptionality.

Alex was identified with a learning disability at a young age, and he was eligible to receive additional support in high school, but he chose not to obtain the extra services because Alex feared his peers would ridicule him:

I just didn't want any added services. I didn't want to be different than anybody else. Especially in high school, you're so self-conscious of yourself, your appearance, the way you act. I didn't want to seem like I was a charity case, or some idiot that couldn't do the work. I just tried to bust my butt as much as I could, but working harder doesn't mean working smarter. (Alex, January 21st, 2007)

Alex refused remedial services as he did not want to be perceived as different because of his identification. He soon realized that his extra effort was not paying off.

Alex noted that during high school he did not spend a lot of time with his friends because he was overwhelmed with keeping up with his academics: "I did not go out every night with my friends; I was working hard to try to finish it" (Alex, January 21st, 2007). Alex transferred schools in his OAC [grade 13] year and obtained accommodations because he already felt that he was isolated from his peers: "It was a new school, and I was already seen as an outsider" (Alex, January 21st, 2007). Alex knew that he would not be accepted by this new group of peers, and he requested the accommodations that he admitted to really needing. These accommodations helped Alex achieve academic success and reach his goal of attending university.

The participants all received accommodations in university as a result of their advocating for their own needs. This was a new experience for all of the participants. Alex, Olivia, and Nicky needed to obtain a signature from their professors in order to write their exams in a separate room from their peers. These 3 participants all attended the center for learning disabilities at their university and consequently began to feel less isolated from their peers. “I started going to the center for learning disabilities, and there were more people there than I saw in high school. I was a lot more comfortable with the idea that I wasn’t the only one” (Alex, January 21st, 2007).

In high school, Alex felt that he was the only one at his school with a learning disability. After he attended the centre for students with learning disabilities at his university, he became more aware that there were other individuals with exceptionalities similar to his.

Compared to high school, Nicky thought she was academically more successful in university because of the computer equipment and accommodations she received. “I think my grades increased when I went to university” (Nicky, January 27th, 2007). Before Nicky began university classes, she attended a 6-week program sponsored by her institution. The program was designed to help individuals with learning disabilities with the transition to a postsecondary education:

This program taught me about the social aspects of university, and they [professors] don’t hand-hold you as much in university. They [professors] don’t remind you every day that your project is due next week. They taught us

note taking, advocacy skills, time management, reading and writing skills, researching skills, how to use the library. Those little things that nobody takes the time to show you, but you need to know them, especially having a learning disability. It [the program] kind of gives you a little bit of a heads up. (Nicky, January 27th, 2007)

Nicky felt that this program provided her with useful information for attending university. As well, Nicky had not enjoyed the social aspects of high school. Yet, when she went to university, she tried to make an effort to join more groups and become more socially involved, “I joined intramurals, Walk Home program. I met a lot of people through that. I tried to join a bunch of things so people would get to know me” (Nicky, January 27th, 2007). This was also the case with Alex, as when he attended university he made a conscious effort to become more social, and he joined extracurricular activities: “My athletics and other extracurriculum helped give me more confidence” (Alex, January 21st, 2007). Alex admitted that being involved in these groups boosted his self-esteem.

After high school, Olivia attended college; however she did not enjoy this experience. Olivia switched colleges but stayed in the same program, *Child and Youth Worker*. At both colleges Olivia did not receive any accommodations. After graduating, Olivia was a Child and Youth Worker for 10 years, and at the age of 30 she decided to go back to school to become a teacher. Olivia felt that if she was going to achieve her goal to become a teacher, then she needed to obtain services from the university special education department: “I realized that I needed to go to the access centre if I wanted to go to teacher’s college and be successful” (Olivia,

February 7th, 2007). The biggest barrier Olivia faced was to make others aware of her identification and to become an advocate for herself. Olivia's previous school experiences indicated to her that she required certain accommodations to reach her full potential and her goal to become a teacher.

Identification and Effective Accommodations

Alex's and Olivia's learning disabilities were identified early in their elementary career, and they both received accommodations, albeit very different accommodations. Alex's work was not modified for him, and he did not receive any other accommodations except for being exempted from French: "I was taken out of French each day and given time to just catch up [on work]" (Alex, January 21st, 2007). Alex received support from the special education teacher for one period a day in which he had the opportunity to receive support for work that he was struggling with. When Alex attended high school, he recalls that he had difficulty memorizing information for tests. One of his teachers saw Alex struggling and gave him some assistance, which helped Alex understand and learn the information:

One high school teacher asked me when I am reading a note off the board and studying from it, do I simply copy the exact same thing and try to remember it. I said, "Yes." The teacher pointed out that this wasn't the way that I talked [in class] and that I should try to make the information my own. (Alex, January 21st, 2007)

After this interaction with his teacher, any information Alex was given and required to learn for a test, he transformed into his own words.

Olivia received accommodations in the first few years of elementary school: “In grade 1 they had told my mom that something was happening and I started to get withdrawn to a learning strategy class” (a segregated class for students who are academically struggling or have been identified with a learning disability. Students are taught specific skills to help them become more successful in school; Olivia, February 7th, 2007). When Olivia was in grade 6 she refused any assistance from the special education teachers. To date, Olivia is unsure of why she responded in this manner. After grade 4, Olivia felt that she suppressed information and experiences pertaining to her learning disability. “I found out what I was diagnosed with in grade 12 and that I used to go to a learning strategy class when I was younger. I [had] completely suppressed that [memory]” (Olivia, February 7th, 2007). After Olivia realized she had a learning disability, she could remember some of the events that occurred in her learning strategy class. As an adult, Olivia has created her own learning strategies. She often forgets information such as a grocery list, and in order to accommodate for this deficit she writes information down: “I am constantly using post-it notes. I make a list and things like that” (Olivia, February 7th, 2007).

The other 2 participants, Nicky and Marie, were not identified with a learning disability until they were at the end of their high school careers. The majority of accommodations they received were in university. For example, Nicky found it helpful when she was writing exams for her professors to highlight the key words in a question. “A couple of teachers in university would highlight the important words for me, and I would read only those words”(Nicky, January 27th, 2007). Nicky’s

exceptionality is reading; she tends to read using phonetic strategies and not whole word methods. This strategy that her professors employed helped Nicky focus on the important information in the question.

The only accommodations that Marie received in university were extensions on her assignments. She never asked for any other accommodations because Marie was inexperienced with her identification and unaware of the assistance she could secure:

I never really received a lot of advantages other than extensions. I wasn't used to the accommodations. I was kind of lost at that point. I didn't know where to start because at 18 and for the first time in university, I was making it on my own. (Marie, January 30th, 2007)

Nicky, Olivia, and Alex received accommodations when they entered university. The 3 participants acquired very similar accommodations to one another in their postsecondary institutions, even though they all attended different universities. Olivia was given numerous software programs and a computer. She also obtained a tape recorder in order to tape lectures and the opportunity to write her exams in the resource center. The technology Nicky received in university was one of the first accommodations that she had received since her identification with a learning disability. All of the support that was given to Nicky was very valuable and helped her to become more successful in university than she was in high school: "I had a computer, and Creswell, which is a speak programming. I had software, and then I had extra time" (Olivia, February 7th 2007).

I got a computer and software that was fully paid for. I had *Inspiration* [software for graphic organizers], it was a huge help. I had note-taker and a tape recorder in the classroom and extra time on exams. I had computer-written exams, which was nice because I type much quicker than I write.

(Nicky, January 27th, 2007)

On the other hand, in university, Alex did not receive any technology support; however he did obtain accommodations on his exams: “[On tests and exams], I received extra time and a quiet room where I could focus. I would just usually go to a separate room and get a little bit of extra time and do my test” (Alex, January 21st, 2007). Consequently, the participants felt that the accommodations they obtained in university were far superior to any other help they had received in previous educational institutions.

Marie, Alex, and Olivia did not request accommodations in the teacher education program. “I didn’t ask for any accommodations in teacher’s college because I had gained confidence in university and I wanted to do this on my own” (Olivia, February 7th, 2007). Olivia used the same strategies in the teacher education program that she did in university. Olivia had a family friend, Nelson, correct her work and used *Kurzweil* (voice-activated assistive software) to write her papers. Olivia did disclose on her application that she had a learning disability. She did not access the student services office at this university because Olivia attended a teacher education program that was held at a satellite campus. This satellite campus did not have student services counsellors or access to resources like the main university campus.



While in the teacher education program, Nicky did ask for a few accommodations such as less required readings, the use of mind maps instead of writing an essay, and permission to complete in-class assignments at home and submit via e-mail. Nicky believed that she could be successful independently and therefore did not need a lot of assistance: "I did get a few accommodations in teacher's college, but I did not find that I needed many; just a few were fine" (Nicky, May 27th, 2007, e-mail). Nicky desired to have technology but had a difficult time accessing this equipment. Nicky also had a friend synthesize readings, and together they discussed the information with examples and in the context of classroom issues. Both Nicky and Olivia believed that their teacher education programs were comprised of hands-on experiences which were not graded; therefore numerous academic accommodations were not necessary. If they had difficulty on an assignment or task, both Nicky and Olivia confidently informed their professors of their needs in light of their exceptionality.

Alex, Olivia, and Nicky all indicated their exceptionality designations on their teacher education applications; Marie did not indicate her exceptionality designation on her teacher application. The accommodations that were provided for them helped decrease their feelings of isolation and frustration. Despite this, their abilities to overcome obstacles and foster positive self-esteem were attributed to not only their accommodations but also the support system of family and friends that they had throughout their lives.

Isolation, Frustration, and Support

During their educational careers, all of the participants experienced feelings of isolation and frustration. When Alex was a young child he was unaware of his identification and academically struggled; as a result he felt ostracized from his peers. Because of these negative emotions Alex perceived that he was abnormal: “I thought that something was wrong with me and that I was stupid. I was so embarrassed” (Alex, January 21st, 2007). Alex felt as though he did not belong. The uncertainties that Alex had about his learning struggles had a negative impact on his self-image. Growing up Alex tried to become “invisible” and he distanced himself from his peers by becoming introverted and avoiding participation in classroom discussions:

I was incredibly shy. I hated talking. I always sat in the back of the room just because I was not confident in my own abilities to answer questions.

Whenever I did [answer questions], they were wrong and I was laughed at. It was no fun, and I couldn’t wait for the day to end. I was just hoping that no one would notice me. (Alex, January 21st, 2007)

When Marie and Nicky spoke about their high school experience, both articulated feeling frustrated with their workload:

Completing assignments was an incredibly frustrating experience. I was bogged down with work! Language was only one subject; I had to contend with Geography, History, Law, and you know it tends to be quite a bit of a burden. (Marie, January 30th, 2007)

In high school, Marie became overwhelmed with her courses because there was more emphasis on reading and the assignments increased in difficulty.

Similarly, Nicky became increasingly frustrated with the work in high school:

[High school] was a lot of work for me, and I would get frustrated. I would bring homework home that I couldn't finish at school, on top of those projects, and the Independent Study Unit they gave me. It all was a lot. I spent a lot of time working on my homework and projects. I would go to bed really late at night. (Nicky, January 27th, 2007)

The participants voiced their feelings of isolation and frustration; however they were able to overcome these emotional obstacles. The participants credited their success to the personal support systems upon which they relied during their educational careers. These support systems varied for each participant. In his interview, Alex talked about his parents being his greatest support, especially his mother: "My parents always helped me. They often remind me of those hours of homework each night. My mother did a little more than she was supposed to" (Alex, January 21st, 2007). Schoolwork was very difficult for Alex, and his mother would sit with him almost every night to explain assignments or help him to complete his homework. Alex's dad was not as involved as his mother because his father was a police officer and often was on shift work. Alex also noted that his father was less patient than his mother: "My dad is smart, but has no patience" (Alex, January 21st, 2007). Both of his parents were concerned with Alex's grades and made an effort to be involved in Alex's day-to-day work: "They made sure I was doing well, and they were concerned about my grades. They would often talk

to me about my grades” (Alex, January 21st, 2007). Alex admitted that without his parents’ involvement he might not have been as successful in completing his high school education.

Nicky also received substantial support from her parents. In high school, before Nicky would write a test, her parents would help her study: “My parents would write me notes every morning before I went to school. [For example, the note might] say, “remember to read the question carefully” (Nicky, January 27th, 2007). Her mother used to proofread Nicky’s essays: “My mom was my built-in proofreader before we had spell check and computers” (Nicky, January 27th, 2007). Her father was an enormous support when Nicky was identified with a learning disability. Nicky received morale assistance from her high school and university student services department. In high school, before she was identified with a learning disability, Nicky built a positive relationship with two teachers in the special education department: “I was really lucky, because the special education department at the school was fantastic” (Nicky, January 27th, 2007). These teachers taught her some learning strategies and allowed Nicky to write her exams in their department office. When Nicky was having difficulty in high school, she confided in these two special education teachers, and they requested a psychoeducational assessment for Nicky. In university Nicky also found support in the student services office, where special education assistance was provided:

I was only a 5-minute walk from the special education office. When I was having a meltdown or wanted to pack up and move home, I was able to go there and, say “What do I do?” They would respond, “Go back and write your

paper and you will be fine!” That was a huge thing that really helped me.

(Nicky, January 27th, 2007)

In high school Nicky had numerous friends who did not understand how her learning disability impacted her life: “I had lots of friends in high school, but they just thought that I always had lots of homework” (Nicky, May 27th, 2007, e-mail). The friendships that Nicky formed were very different in university. Nicky met a lot of individuals who became not only her friends but also supporters. A lot of these new friendships were with individuals who had learning disabilities:

I met a great group of friends at the special education office. That was kind of like our own community, because we were all in the same boat. We all had the same social skills issues that we were dealing with; it was nice to go to the there [Special Education Office] and have people there who understood you.

(Nicky, January 27th, 2007)

This new group of friends were able to relate to Nicky’s experiences as an individual with a learning disability, as they shared similar challenges. When Nicky was in the teacher education program, she met one individual who really helped her with the academic component of this program: “I had one great friend who wrote summary notes and gave them to me” (Nicky, May 27th, 2007, e-mail). Her friend understood that it was difficult for Nicky to read large amounts of text. When a professor assigned readings, her friend would summarize the information for Nicky. This support made it easier for Nicky to read and understand the text.

Olivia also had support throughout school, but less so from her parents than from family friends: “I relied heavily on a family friend, Nelson, to proofread my

work” (Olivia, February 7th, 2007). Nelson was an older gentleman who was married to Pam and had children that were Olivia’s age: “They [Nelson and Pam] would take me on vacation, and they treated me like their daughter” (Olivia, February 7th, 2007). When Olivia was younger she recalled that she had numerous friends: “I can remember from very young, really wanting and having lots and lots of friends, but not having any real [best] friend (Olivia, February 7th, 2007). Reflecting back on her numerous peer relationships, Olivia realized that hardly any of her friendships were genuine. When Olivia was 5 years old she lived with her mother’s boyfriend, Jerry, and he taught her the alphabet:

I remember him teaching me the alphabet. We had the alphabet around the room and I remember really liking that. He would make songs and things like that. And I don’t remember anyone else influencing [like this] me in terms of academics. (Olivia, February 7th, 2007)

Olivia also received support from the student services department at the university she attended. Throughout university, Olivia worked full time and was a single parent of a young child. She received the encouragement of her friends, which gave Olivia the strength to continue through university and reach her goal of becoming a teacher: “Well, I was in university and struggling and my friends would often say, ‘We are proud of you!’” (Olivia, February 7th, 2007). Olivia’s childhood friend, Shelly, also assisted by watching her son for her when she went to the teacher education program: “Shelly would watch Ben, and that was a huge help, because I left to go to school really early” (Olivia, February 7th, 2007).

All of the participants had a group of individuals who supported and provided emotional strength for them. These individuals helped the participants through difficult periods during their education. Once these barriers were overcome, these family members and friends were there to celebrate the participants' successes. Most important, these supportive individuals were especially needed when the participants became aware of the implications of their exceptionalities.

Awareness of Learning Disability at Age 18

Coincidentally, all of the participants articulated that they became aware of their learning disability at the age of 18. Alex and Olivia were both identified with a learning disability when they were in approximately grade 2. At that time, Olivia's mother told her about the diagnosis; however Olivia suppressed this information: "I found out in grade 12 [that I had a learning disability]; I had completely suppressed it [the identification]" (Olivia, February 7th, 2007). In grade 12, Olivia's family life teacher, Mrs. Wright, inadvertently informed Olivia that she had a learning disability. Furthermore, Mrs. Wright spent time with Olivia, helping her to fully understand her exceptionality:

When Mrs. Wright approached me in grade 12, she said, "Do you know you have a learning disability?" I said, "No." She replied, "Let's look at your OSR." She showed me that I was withdrawn [for extra assistance] and the comments that were made. (Olivia, February 7th, 2007)

Olivia's encounter with Mrs. Wright brought saliency to her identification and allowed Olivia to come to terms with her learning disability. When Olivia confronted her mother, her mother implied that Olivia had not accepted her

diagnosis: “You refused to go [for assistance], so that’s your fault [that you are now struggling]” (Olivia, February 7th 2007).

On the other hand, Alex was never aware of his exceptionality because his parents did not divulge his identification. Alex believes that his parents did not tell him about his learning disability because they were not sure of how to deal with this information themselves. Alex did not resent his parents for keeping his learning disability a secret because he understood their decision: “Who would love to tell their kid that they are not as smart as everybody else and there are certain things that they can’t do?” (Alex, January 21st, 2007). One day, when Alex’s parents were cleaning the house, they accidentally came across his psychoeducational assessment and gave it to Alex. “In OAC they gave me my psychoeducational assessment that they had somewhere. When I received it I read it several times, cover to cover” (Alex, January 21st, 2007). His parents did not see this documentation as important. They gave Alex this report only because they were going to throw it away. “It was more or less like, ‘We found this do you want it?’ They did not see it as an important document or anything that I would really need” (Alex, January 21st, 2007). His parents did sit down with Alex and read over some parts of the report with him, but they did not have a discussion about the recommendations. Finding this report came at a perfect time for Alex, because he was starting to give up hope and his identification helped him to realized how far he had made it own his own:

I look at some areas where they assessed me and I look at my communication, math skills, and reading abilities now. I realized I had changed. I [tried] to image what that person would look like if they were my age [without the skills

that I have]. I expect them to be much slower than I was. I just got the idea that if I could do what I have already done, then I could [still] accomplish more. (Alex, January 21st, 2007)

Alex used his documentation as a motivational tool, and this encouraged him to continue on his educational journey.

Throughout their educational experiences, Marie and Nicky quickly realized that they were not reaching their full academic potential: “I would study with my parents and on my own, and I would know all the material. Then I would bring the test home, and my test did not reflect my knowledge because I wasn’t able to understand the question” (Nicky, January 27th, 2007). Marie and Nicky often compared themselves to their peers and noticed that they learned differently from them. They each recognized that what came easily to someone their own age was a laborious task for them. Marie reflected on this:

I knew that there was something wrong [with me]. I absolutely knew because there is no way that somebody my age should be doing language assignments for 4 hours at night and at the pace that I was doing it! (Marie, January 30th, 2007)

Through their own perseverance and desire to reach their goals of becoming teachers, Marie and Nicky each fought to obtain a psychological assessment:

I had just turned 18 in November, and I knew that I was leaving the school in June. I only had about 8 months to receive an assessment. I knew that I was applying to universities and colleges in December, and if something was going to happen, it needed to happen now. (Nicky, January 27th, 2007)

After being assessed, both participants were identified as gifted and learning disabled. When Marie and Nicky received their diagnoses, both participants felt a sense of relief and further understood their learning disabilities:

Once we [Nicky and her parents] got the assessment, “Oh that all makes sense now!” Everything comes back into play, and you then realize why it [always] took me so long [to read]. I read letters, not [whole] words. (Nicky, January 27th, 2007)

When Marie first discovered her exceptionality she experienced some mixed emotions.

I was relieved because I was correct in the assumption [that I had a disability].

I felt let down that I had not been given this information sooner. The whole process was not very fun. (Marie, January 30th, 2007)

Marie was satisfied with her identification because the label “learning disabled” was what she believed she was, and this identification was reassuring for her. Yet, Marie was also disappointed by the timing of this identification, because if she had received her identification earlier in her life, then she could have avoided many of her academic struggles. Marie felt cheated because many individuals with learning disabilities are identified when they are in elementary grades. Marie believed that if she had been identified at a younger age, then she might have had a longer opportunity to accept her diagnosis: “I did not have the chance to grow into it [the learning disability] or understand what I was dealing with. I was coming to terms with it myself. What does it mean [to have a learning disability]?” (Marie, January 30th, 2007).

When Nicky received her identification, it did not change the way she viewed herself. It did, however, give her a sense of relief:

I don't think it [the learning disability identification] changed me at all. It just made sense now, and it was kind of like all the pieces of a puzzle kind of fit together now. (Nicky, January 27th, 2007)

Since Nicky was in grade 3, her parents realized that she learned differently from her peers, and they tried to get her tested. Teachers told her parents not to worry. When Nicky shared with her parents that she had a learning disability they felt frustrated because they had attempted several times to obtain a psychoeducational assessment for their daughter without any success.

My parents were a little more troubled than I was [when they discovered that she had a learning disability]. They were happy in a sense that we now knew, but they were frustrated because they had been bugging people since I was in grade 3 [for an assessment]. (Nicky, January 27th, 2007)

When Marie was a child, her older brother was identified as gifted. Marie believed that her parents realized that there was something different about her learning abilities but chose to never push the school for an assessment. Marie believes that her parents' choice was attributable to the era in which she grew up: "I grew up in the self-esteem generation where they just wanted you to feel good about yourself" (Marie, January, 30th 2007).

Alex's, Olivia's, Nicky's, and Marie's awareness of their exceptionality at the age of 18 was a positive experience, because prior to this point in their lives they all felt like outcasts. When the participants became aware of their identification, they

were comforted by the realization that a learning disability is a fairly common exceptionality. As young adults completing high school, these participants were empowered with this information and had to decide to whom they would disclose this information. They recognized that they also had the option to withhold their identification from others since their exceptionality was “invisible.”

Disclosure of Learning Disability

Alex, Olivia, Marie, and Nicky have all disclosed their learning disabilities to individuals other than their family members; however, the degree of openness varied. Three of the participants, Alex, Marie, and Nicky, have disclosed their learning disabilities as a motivator for their students and parents with children who have exceptionalities. Alex reveals his learning disability to any of his students that are struggling or receiving support from a resource teacher. Alex discloses his identification to parents if their children are academically struggling or diagnosed with a learning disability:

I tell my students who see the ISSP [special education] teacher that when I was young I used to see an ISSP [special education] teacher also. I also reveal that I had a psychoeducational assessment done and I had trouble in school, and look where I am now. I tell them that just because you are having trouble in school doesn't mean that you always will. I also share this information with parents, and they love it! I don't share it [his diagnosis] with every single parent or all students. I don't share this information with high-[achieving] students' parents. (Alex, January 21st, 2007)

When Alex was in elementary school his teachers and friends were aware of his exceptionality; however this changed in high school. Here, Alex chose not to disclose his exceptionality: “I was very embarrassed, so I didn’t want to share it with them. In elementary school they knew about it [my learning disability], but in high school they did not” (Alex, January 21st, 2007). Alex also saw high school as a fresh start and was aware of the social implications of being labeled with an exceptionality: “I didn’t want to be different than anybody else. Especially in high school, when you are so self-conscious of yourself. I didn’t want to be seen as a charity case or an idiot” (Alex, January 21st, 2007).

As a teacher, Marie also reveals her exceptionality to her students with learning disabilities and parents who have children that are being diagnosed with a learning disability:

I know I have [revealed my learning disability] to parents when their children have gone to be identified or when they say, “I am concerned and I don’t want my child to be labelled.” I always respond, “Labels aren’t necessarily a bad thing!” Nine times out of 10 I usually tell them somebody else’s story or my own. (Marie, January 30th, 2007)

Nicky has always been very open about disclosing her learning disability. In university, Nicky, along with a male friend with a learning disability, created a forum where they both went to various places such as schools and other universities to talk about their experiences with a learning disability. After graduating university, Nicky has continued her public speaking career:

I speak to kids [with learning disabilities, and] I try to give them a positive message. There are kids that don't want to tell anybody [about their learning disabilities], and it's not right for me to push that on them. I want them to know that it's [a learning disability] not something to be scared of, it's who you are. If you were blind, you can't hide that from anybody. I don't know why it is such a big thing, hiding you have learning disability. (Nicky, January 27th, 2007)

Because Nicky's students are in grade 3, she does not consciously inform her students of her learning disability. However, Nicky tutors students with learning disabilities and informs them of her exceptionality. She also allows the parents of these students to read her psychoeducational report.

On the other hand, Olivia was very hesitant when disclosing her learning disability. She revealed her diagnosis only in small groups of people with whom she felt extremely safe and only if the individuals were talking about exceptionalities: "I told a couple of people and a few small groups of people. Then, in teacher's college, I told a few more people; they were my age and it came up in conversation" (Olivia, February 7th, 2007)

Although participants were open with sharing their identification with their students and parents, they revealed their learning disabilities to professors and employers only when necessary. Participants divulged their exceptionality to this group of latter individuals only when they felt that their exceptionality was becoming a hindrance and disclosure was the only way to overcome the challenge or receive appropriate accommodations. In university, Marie majored in Art and

revealed her learning disability to professors whose courses she believed would be difficult for her to complete without accommodations:

Honestly, other than a couple of professors I had, I don't really recall it [learning disability] being much of an issue. I don't recall ever thinking it [learning disability] had to be concealed. I never thought it [learning disability] was something that I need to tell them about. If I was having difficulties I would bring it [learning disability] up. (Marie, January 30th, 2007)

In university, Olivia was in the Child and Youth Work program and disclosed her learning disability only to professors who were in this field. When Olivia was required to complete a course outside of this faculty, she was more hesitant to reveal her identification and did so only when necessary:

I took a statistics class, and the teacher was such a jerk! I didn't really tell him I had a learning disability, and then I realized that if we had an exam I wouldn't get extra time on it and I wasn't going to pass. I told the teacher about my learning disability, and he was rude about it. (Olivia, February 7th, 2007)

The only time Olivia revealed her exceptionality was when she felt that her silence would be detrimental to her success in the particular course. Nobody at Olivia's workplace knows that she has a learning disability: "I'm still awkward about it. Maybe I am in denial. I just want to make it on my own, because essentially I think you have to" (Olivia, February 7th, 2007).

Similarly, Nicky did not feel that it was initially necessary to disclose her learning disability to her school board. Eventually, she revealed her exceptionality when she was feeling overwhelmed and anxious:

I don't know that I told her [the principal] or my vice principal; I can't remember which one I told or both. I know I did tell one of them because we were talking about report cards, and I was overwhelmed. (Nicky, January, 27th 2007)

Alex, Olivia, Marie, and Nicky divulged their identification when they believed that the information could be used as an example of a model to help someone to overcome a challenge. As well, among colleagues, participants did not randomly reveal their exceptionalities; they evaluated the necessity and impact of sharing their diagnosis. It is typical for individuals with learning disabilities to rarely disclose their exceptionalities because they fear that they will be misjudged or looked at differently (Ferri et al., 2005). This theme was confirmed in the participants' responses, as all of the participants discussed an incident when they disclosed their learning disabilities and then experienced some degree of ignorance.

Negative Impact of the "Learning Disability" Label

During their interviews, Alex, Nicky, Marie, and Olivia all cited an incident in which they had a negative interaction that related to their learning disability. The participants recall these incidents with anger because their abilities were doubted and their academic futures were discounted as hopeless.

When Marie was given the results of her psychoeducational assessment, the comment that the psychologist made to her has resonated with Marie for the past 15 years:

I just remember it [the comment] clear as anything. It may have never been said in the way I took it. It [the comment] could have been said with the most of love that anybody had; I can't really remember how she said it. Somehow from that meeting, I took away the thought that I shouldn't attend postsecondary school. I remember being very, very hurt. (Marie, January 30th, 2007)

Marie does admit that she is not totally sure of the intent of the psychologist's comments, but the way that Marie interpreted it was negative. Marie confessed that before the incident with the psychologist, she had not decided if she was going to attend college or university. After the encounter with the psychologist, Marie wanted to go to university because she felt that the psychologist was trying to persuade her to attend college and she was determined that no one would ever tell her what she was not capable of doing.

When Olivia was very young, her parents got divorced, and her father immediately moved back to his hometown in the United States of America. Olivia tried to keep in contact with her father by writing him letters and visiting during the summers. Her father and his family would constantly tease Olivia about her spelling and her pronunciation of certain words:

I would write him [her dad] letters and he would comment, "Your writing is horrible!" One day, I remember overhearing my uncle and his family saying

how my writing and spelling is horrible. Then one time I was helping my dad and he said to me, “As soon as you open your mouth people know you are dumb!” (Olivia, February 7th, 2007)

Recalling these circumstances still brings tears to Olivia’s eyes because she felt that her extended family and her father believed that she was unintelligent: “After all of this, I was absolutely devastated” (Olivia, February 7th, 2007). Shortly after this occurrence, Olivia’s father died, and she has never been able attain closure.

When Olivia was younger, she lived with her mother, brother, and many of her mother’s friends. Olivia can remember her house always being lively and having huge parties. At these parties, they always played games like scrabble or charades. Olivia would constantly get phrases or song lyrics incorrect: “I was constantly getting songs wrong, and they would tease me” (Olivia, February 7th, 2007).

When asked to recall circumstances when their designated learning disability elicited reactions, Nicky and Alex both remarked about the negative feedback they received from their teachers:

I went to ask for help and he [the teacher] said, “You probably shouldn’t apply to university because you’re not going to make it. You are not going to be able to do these [writing assignments] type of things. (Nicky, January 27th, One day when Alex was handing in an assignment, his teacher took Alex aside and gave him unwanted advice: 2007)

He [the teacher] said that I was not trying or working hard. That is the worst thing that you could tell a kid that is trying their best, “You are not trying!” I just couldn’t do it anymore. (Alex, January 21st, 2007)

Unlike Nicky, Alex never asked his teachers for assistance or spoke in class.

Alex, Nicky, Olivia, and Marie distinctly remembered these types of negative interactions too. These exchanges have left such a tremendous impression on the participants that after over a decade, they have not forgotten what happened. The participants also stated that these negative comments were not going to hold them back; on the contrary, these statements increased their desires and drive to become teachers.

Desire, Drive, and Obstacles

Alex, Marie, Olivia, and Nicky were all aware at a young age that they wanted to become teachers: “Funny enough, I wanted to be a teacher for as long as I can remember” (Marie, January 30th, 2007). Their desires to become teachers helped them to overcome the numerous obstacles that they faced in school. For example, even though high school was very difficult for Alex, he knew that dropping out was not an option if he wanted to become a teacher: “I wanted to be a teacher since I was 15. I knew that I couldn’t exactly leave high school and do that” (Alex, January 21st, 2007). The participants all had one similar goal: They aspired to become teachers; however, their justification for choosing this career varied.

Marie had always enjoyed surrounding herself with learners; therefore becoming a teacher was a logical step:

I get a lot from being around other learners. I find that I learn a lot being in that [kind of] environment. I just enjoy that energy. It's kind of ironic hearing myself say it, because it's the same environment that caused me a lot of stress.

(Marie, January 30th, 2007)

At a young age, Nicky knew that teaching was a definite career possibility, and this idea was affirmed during her first teaching practicum:

I always wanted to be a teacher when I was little. I also played teacher in my basement and with my stuffed animals and friends. I always wanted to be a teacher, and the very first day I was in a classroom I came home that night and told my mother that teaching is where I need to be. It just felt right. (Nicky, January 27th, 2007)

For approximately 10 years, Olivia worked in a school board as a Child and Youth Worker and always dreamed of becoming a teacher. One day, Olivia decided to fulfill her dream for both herself and her young son, Ben:

Being a Child and Youth Worker in a school for 11 years, and knowing how much teachers get paid, you realize that you are underpaid! I was doing a lot of the teacher role, so I didn't understand why I didn't go for it. I needed to go further for my own self and for Ben [her son]. I would be a good role model for him. I always wanted to be a teacher; it just took me longer to get there.

(Olivia, February 7th, 2007)

When Olivia attended high school and college, she did not receive any accommodations. When she went into teacher education, Olivia felt she would not reach her goal of being a teacher if she didn't receive help from the student services

center: “I realized that I needed to go to the [student services] center if I wanted to go to teacher’s college and be successful” (Olivia, February 7th, 2007). Although Olivia was very hesitant to visit this center at her university, Olivia’s desires and drive to become a teacher gave her the courage to obtain help.

Prior to entering university, Alex, Olivia, Nicky, and Marie all realized that their academic abilities were weaker in comparison to their peers and it was necessary for them to improve in this area in order to attain their goals:

I also had to realize that I just can’t keep doing this, because it’s not working.

I was working my butt off for 2 or 3 extra hours [in comparison to his peers]. I knew that if I wanted to be a teacher, I had to go to university. (Alex, January 21st, 2007)

All of the participants noted that the learning disabilities have had some impact on their teaching careers. Currently, there are two obstacles that Nicky faces in her teaching career: “Reading in class [is difficult] if I have not preread, which is not always possible. Report card proofing [is also difficult]” (Nicky, May 27th, 2007, e-mail). Olivia has just started her teaching career and has not yet encountered any barriers. She realizes that her weakness is spelling, and during the interview she discussed a minor incident that occurred in her classroom: “The first thing that I sent home had a wicked spelling mistake. One of the kids told me the next day that his parents noticed” (Olivia, February 7th, 2007).

Olivia felt that her spelling errors would not be tolerated by her administrators or parents, so she asked for help: “I ask for my parent letters to be proofread, and

the principal rereads them before it gets handed out. I also run it through the computer program that reads it to me” (Olivia, May 28th, 2007, e-mail).

When Marie first started her teaching career, she taught in a high school. Marie loved the curriculum and students in high school, but the lack of structure was difficult for her, given her learning disability:

I had to move my stuff from one classroom to another. I moved all over the place, and sometimes I did not know where I was going. I also had 3 minutes to get there. Then the office would page me and tell me to go somewhere else. My anxiety was through the roof, and it was enough to literally send me over the edge. (Marie, January 30th, 2007)

After a few years Marie started to teach in an elementary school. Marie is currently teaching junior kindergarten and likes the consistent structure and the fact that she has her own classroom. She noted that changing classroom, evoked high levels of anxiety compared to colleagues. All of the participants demonstrated drive and determination to overcome any obstacles that they faced to become and be successful as teachers.

Empathy, Compassion, and Self-Concept

Participants tended to understand the needs of all their students because of their own academic struggles and identification. They were empathetic to the needs of students with exceptionalities, and this was echoed in the responses of all of the participants. Nicky discussed the importance of being discreet when giving her students with learning disabilities the accommodations that they need:

I don't think that there is any reason to say to kids with learning disabilities that you need to be isolated [segregated] because you are different. If I was going to give them a test, I would give those kids extra time. I would tell them to hand in their unfinished test and come see me at recess. Then nobody knows they had extra time. (Nicky, January 27th, 2007)

Nicky believes that her empathy for students with learning disabilities comes from her personal experiences, and she views her learning disability as a benefit:

Having a learning disability makes me who I am and makes me as outspoken as I am. It [the learning disability] makes me do my presentations. I wouldn't be upset to lose the label, but it would not change who I was. (Nicky, January 27th, 2007)

Olivia talked about her desire to do everything in her power to create a sense of success for a young male student in her class who was at the time struggling in math:

He's having a horrible time with multiplication, and I invented a math game with circles. I gave him a set of poker chips that I got at the dollar store. I am [always] thinking of creative ways to help him to learn multiplication and trying to raise his self-esteem. When we are using multiplication flash cards, I know the questions that he'll definitely know the answers to, so I'll ask him them. Then he gains confidence in himself. I think I do this because of my own experiences and feelings of being stupid. (Olivia, February 7th, 2007)

Olivia is very empathic to her student's academic struggles because of her own negative school experiences and poor self-concept: "I know what it [a learning

disability] does to your confidence and self-esteem” (Olivia, February 7th, 2007). As a result Olivia tries to create situations where her student can feel successful: “I am really building him up so that he will have confidence and take risks” (Olivia, February 7th, 2007). Furthermore, Olivia feels that her exceptionality has created compassion towards the obstacles that are faced by some individuals. “I think that it [her learning disability] has helped me to be understanding and empathic [about] where people come from and how they learn” (Olivia, February 7th, 2007). She describes herself as a sensitive person, especially if her colleagues or other students are saying negative comments about her students:

I’m really probably oversensitive, but if anyone [referring to her coworkers and other students] picks on them [referring to her students with learning disabilities] or says anything bad about them, I’m down their throats! I am strict about those things. (Olivia, February 7th, 2007)

Olivia refuses to accept her students being “put down” because of her own childhood experiences when adults constantly made her feel worthless.

Academically, school was a struggle for Olivia, and she did not have any self-confidence in her abilities. As a teacher, Olivia understands the importance of creating self-worth in her students, especially the ones who are academically low.

Olivia is compassionate and empathetic toward not only her young male student but also toward any person who is struggling in life.

Marie also stands up for students when she feels that her colleagues are unfairly labelling them:

You know how teachers talk sometimes. If someone ever said an inappropriate comment [about a student with a learning disability], I would jump on it. If a teacher said, “That kid is low,” I would reply, “I don’t know if I would say that exactly because that kid has a learning disability and I have one too!” (Marie, January 30th, 2007)

Marie is emphatic towards this group of students because she shares similar characteristics with them and has personal experience with being characterized because of her learning disability.

Alex tries to build self-confidence in his students who have a variety of exceptionalities. Frequently, on his planning time and lunch breaks, Alex visits the Moderated Needs and the Special Education classroom in his school. Alex compared how he treats students with exceptionalities to how his colleagues interact with these students:

I will always go in there [Special Education classroom] and chat with the kids. I find that maybe two or three other teachers will say “Hi” to these kids. I go into their classroom on my planning time or lunch. Other teachers never associate with these kids because the teachers feel uncomfortable around them or are not sure what to say. I will often stop at the ISSP [Special Education classroom] room and bug everyone. I will ask the kids, “What are you doing?” I’ve even got a request to come in and see them [the students] when they are working hard. (Alex, January 21st, 2007)

Alex tried to help the students who were struggling in his classroom and refused to give up. Alex was persistent because of his personal experiences; he understood

how it felt to be rejected by a teacher: “I [think I] would feel guilty if I gave up on a child, because that is how I was treated in school and it made things a lot harder for me” (Alex, January 21st, 2007). Alex’s compassion for students is deep-rooted from his own academic struggles.

Publicly, Nicky strives to get across the message of acceptance of exceptionalities and of “self-love” through her public speaking presentation entitled, “Open Your Eyes!” In university, Nicky and her friend created this presentation, which discusses learning disabilities, accommodations, modifications, and assistive computer technology:

We [Nicky and her partner] just started doing presentations for a group of professors, TAs [teaching assistants], and new university students. Then we started doing them [presentations] for high school teachers in different areas. We did a couple of presentations to a few groups of high school students that were just going to university. We were trying to get a message that they’ll be fine; although it can be scary and intimidating, they will be fine. (Nicky, January 27th, 2007)

Furthermore, Nicky mentioned a current circumstance in which she has tried to reach out to a grade 2 boy (in another class) who has anger management difficulty. Nicky’s school follows a behaviour program called “Flip a Card,” which has four different levels and each level has its own colour sticker. Nicky explained this system to me during the interview:

If a student does something bad, then you flip a card, and there are four levels: The first one is a warning, the second one is a 5-minute detention; for the third

one, the teacher calls home, and the last one is the student goes to the office.

(Nicky, January 27th, 2007)

She informed this grade 2 student that if he had a “white card” day (no warning cards), Nicky would give him a sparkly sticker. As a result this boy’s behaviour has been improving in his class and on the playground. Nicky reached out to this boy because she felt that he needs some positive encouragement. “I feel bad for him. I know he has a lot of baggage, emotionally, socially, and academically, and I can relate to him on an academic level” (Nicky, January 27th, 2007). Alex and Nicky both sought to support students with a variety of exceptionalities, even if they were not their classroom teachers.

Olivia viewed her learning disability as a gift that she believes has made her intuitive and helped her in life and in her teaching career:

I think having a learning disability has helped me become really resourceful. I can find out things about people in meeting them for only a half an hour. I can draw that out. I can figure it out. I can figure kids out in 2 minutes flat.

(Olivia, February 7th, 2007)

Olivia’s exceptionality has contributed to her sensitivity and receptivity to others’ needs.

All of the participants believed that their learning disabilities have had a positive impact on their self-concept as well as their perspectives on teaching and learning. For example, compared to other teachers, Olivia feels that she values students’ efforts because of her exceptionality:

I appreciate and I value things differently than what other people might. Other people might value academics as the most important thing. I tell my students that as long as you make it to your goal, it doesn't matter how long it takes [to get there]. You can make it there when you are 50 [years old]. It doesn't have to have a time limit. I value and look at things differently. (Olivia, February 7th, 2007)

Furthermore, Olivia thinks that her LD has made her more empathetic towards individuals who are struggling and has made her realize the importance of knowing where a person comes from: "I think that it [a learning disability] has certainly helped me be more empathetic, understand where students come from, and how learning works for the kids" (Olivia, February 7th, 2007).

Marie believes that individuals with exceptionalities have a deeper understanding of students' academic and personal struggles:

I think that people who have a learning disability ...have been given an understanding of people. Their life experiences can be brought into the classroom, and this helps them to really understand the complexities and the dynamics of a classroom setting. (Marie, January 30th, 2007)

Reflecting back on her life, Marie realizes only now that her learning disability had a greater impact on her life than she ever gave it credit for: "Probably now, in my 30s, I am looking back, and I have realized that it [the learning disability] has probably impacted me more than I realized" (Marie, January 30th, 2007).

Alex feels that his learning disability has given him an inner strength to overcome the numerous obstacles he has faced in his life and now the ability to help others do the same:

It just makes me really appreciate what I am able to do and the people who have helped me. I think my learning disability keeps driving me to help those kids who are struggling and have learning disabilities more than other students, because I want them [the students with learning disabilities] to have a more successful time in school than I did. I try to help these students be more successful, because if someone did not help me in this way, then I wouldn't have been able to get as far. (Alex, January 21st, 2007, p. 26)

Three of the participants alluded to their lower self-esteem as compared to their peers without exceptionalities. Nicky, however, feels that her learning disability actually contributed to her self-esteem:

It's [her learning disability] made me a lot more confident in my abilities. I was always afraid to say, "I don't understand" or "I don't know how to do it" but now I just say "I don't get this" or "can you help me with this?" People are very understanding and know where I am coming from. (Nicky, January 27th, 2007)

Alex, Olivia, Marie, and Nicky have triumphed over several challenges and barriers. When they were younger, all of the participants might have viewed their learning disability as a hindrance, but now as teachers they realize that they are empathic toward the needs of individuals with exceptionalities because of their learning disabilities. Interestingly, this understanding and empathy of these teachers

with learning disabilities has also contributed to heightened sensitivity as to how others treat individuals with exceptionalities.

Critical Views of Colleagues

Alex, Olivia, Marie, and Nicky all expressed that they perceived that their colleagues were not always inclusive with their students that were academically low or had special needs. Alex stated that at the beginning of the school year, when class reorganization often occurs, some of his colleagues purposely move their lower students into other classes in order to have a classroom comprised of high-achieving students:

A teacher moved a child into another classroom because the student was incredibly academically low. The child was in grade 3, but he was functioning at a grade 1 level for most of his skills. The teacher dumped this student because he was academically low, and 2 weeks after she dumped him, we were at an assembly and the student was goofing around and acting childish. The teacher leaned over to me and said, “I can’t stand that kid, I am so glad I got rid of him!” (Alex, January 21st, 2007)

Alex mentioned several incidents when teachers in his school were given a chance to choose students for their classroom that the teachers preferred because these students were academically high or independent workers. Alex believed that these teachers feel that these types of students create less work for them. “I think that they [his colleagues] just want to make things easy on themselves and are tired of going that extra mile” (Alex, January 21st, 2007). However, inevitably these teachers still have some students with academic difficulties in their classroom, even though they

try to avoid this reality. Alex stated that these teachers tend to ignore these students because they regard them as academically hopeless. Obviously, Alex does not share the same view with his colleagues and is often questioned about the amount of time he spends with his group of students that are academically low: “I do things that some teachers say are a waste of time, like showing these kids how to answer a question” (Alex, January 21st, 2007).

Nicky is bothered by her colleagues who complain about having students with learning disabilities in their classroom: “It frustrates me when teachers say, ‘Oh, you have an ISSP [learning disabled] student in your class! It must be so much more planning’” (Nicky, January 27th, 2007). Nicky admits that she is a fairly new teacher but realizes that there are manageable and effective ways to accommodate for these students. Nicky points out that some of her colleagues’ teaching methods simply do not address the needs of the lower functioning students in their classroom. Nicky believes that these teachers do not vary their teaching methods and use only “paper and pencil” activities to teach their classes. Nicky also believes that when teachers implement accommodations or modifications in their lessons for a particular student, they often indirectly isolate the student with the exceptionality from the rest of the class. In comparison to her colleagues, Nicky feels that her teaching methods are very different and take into consideration the needs of students with exceptionalities:

I don’t use paper and pencil as much as other teachers do. If I am going to implement something for my special education students or my ESL [English as a Second Language] kids, I will implement this activity for all of my

students, which most teachers in my school do not do. (Nicky, January 27th, 2007)

In Olivia's school, she believes that many teachers do not understand the challenges that students with exceptionalities experience. On various occasions Olivia has heard some of her colleagues blame the students for their academic failures:

I hear teachers say things about students who are struggling. They say, "Oh well she just lazy!" or "he/she is not trying." I don't think that anyone purposely tries to underachieve. (Olivia, February 7th, 2007)

Based on their own experiences as an individual with a learning disability, Alex, Olivia, Nicky, and Marie had critical views of their colleagues' treatment of students with exceptionalities and those students who are academically low. It is likely that the participants held these perspectives because they personally relate to the emotional impact that this manner had when they were students. Furthermore, the participants are fully aware of how an adult's negative comment can greatly impact a child's self-esteem and self-concept. Although the participants are strongly against how some of their colleagues treated these groups of students, ironically none of the participants verbally conveyed this message of disapproval to their colleagues.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Society's misconceptions of people with exceptionalities force these individuals to work toward overcoming a host of challenges and barriers (Pope, 2001). Persons with learning disabilities often have academic or social challenges, and because this exceptionality is "invisible," these individuals are stereotypically viewed by society as lazy or weird (Morris, 1988). It is not surprising that teachers with learning disabilities are often hesitant to disclose their exceptionality to others for fear of being misunderstood or judged unfairly (Valle et al., 2004).

Teachers with learning disabilities are a discrete group of individuals with lived experiences that must be explored and documented in order to better understand their perspectives (Ferri et al., 2005). However, there is little documentation of the educative and professional experiences of teachers with learning disabilities (Valle et al. 2004). To date, the generated literature has begun to provide insights on best practices for students with learning disabilities and considerations for effective special education services.

Research has indicated characteristics in individuals with learning disabilities that have made them resilient and common strategies that they used to cope with their exceptionalities (Polloway et al., 1992). This information is significant in order to comprehend how some individuals with learning disabilities overcome adversity and create positive strategies in their pursuit to become professionals. Specific to the present study, the following discussion of findings is likely to affirm

the experiences of teachers with learning disabilities and further inform others about supporting individuals with “invisible” exceptionalities (Ferri et al., 2005).

Summary of the Study

The participants for this research were 4 teachers with learning disabilities. This study documented the experiences of these individuals and presented the commonalities and unique qualities of their cases. The participants shared their stories through interviews in which they were asked an array of questions about their lives as students and teachers. All interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed. Transcriptions were sent to the participants to verify accuracy. Clarification of participants’ responses was sought through e-mail communication with the interviewees.

It should be noted that in Ontario, if an individual was identified with an exceptionality prior to 1998 (Bill 181/98), the school was not required to provide any type of special education assistance to the student (Weber & Bennett, 2004). With reference to the participants in this study, when Bill 181/98 was legislated, Marie was approximately 21 years old, Olivia was approximately 26 years old, and Nicky and Alex were approximately 15 years old. Given the ages of these participants, they might not have received assistance from the special education department in their schools as it was not mandatory. As a result, the experiences of these participants will be different from individuals who are now going through the educational system.

The transcribed data were coded and categorized into common phrases and ideas. These ideas were clustered into themes. These themes were presented in a

narrative form to highlight all of the participants' experiences. Nine themes emerged: (a) Perspectives on School Experiences; (b) Identification and Effective Accommodations; (c) Isolation, Frustration, and Support; (d) Awareness of Learning Disability at Age 18; (e) Disclosure of Learning Disability; (f) Negative Impact of the "Learning Disability" Label; (g) Desire, Drive, and Obstacles; (h) Empathy, Compassion, and Self-Concept; and (i) Critical Views of Colleagues.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Literature

This study has contributed to the existing knowledge on the experiences of teachers with learning disabilities by reinforcing the findings presented in previous work (e.g., Ferri et al., 2005; Henry, 1999; Pope, 2001; Valle et al., 2004), and it has contributed unique discoveries for further discussion and research. Recalling their childhood experiences, 3 of the participants expressed a certain degree of anxiety—a typical emotion of individuals with learning disabilities (Milan et al., 2006). When the participants were younger, most of them chose friends who also had exceptionalities and who lacked social skills. The participants perceived that they had poor self-concepts and low self-esteem as a function of their disability and the struggles that they encountered in their educational experiences. Unlike some children with learning disabilities who may tend to display signs of depression (Maag & Reid, 2006), the participants did not experience depression in their childhood or adulthood.

In previously documented work on teachers with learning disabilities (e.g., Ferri et al., 2005), it was difficult to cohesively document the experiences of these individuals as they refused to accept identifying labels. Furthermore, these

participants had negative experiences when accessing special education resources and attributed these barriers to their feelings of depression (Ferri et al.). By contrast, 2 of the participants in the current study who had access to special education resources refused to continue with this support because they were self-conscious and embarrassed. When all of the participants were in university, they obtained help from the student services department, and they noted that these resources helped increase their self-confidence. Not surprising, the provision of appropriate support makes a difference in the educative experience of individuals with learning disabilities.

In contrast to Holdman (1997), in the present study participants did not withhold their identification out of fear of being negatively stigmatized. Indeed, 3 participants openly disclosed their learning disability to their education professors in order to ensure that they received appropriate accommodations. The participants did not inform all of their professors because they felt they did not always need assistance, and they expressed the desire to “make it on their own.”

Similar to the results of Valle et al. (2004), disclosure of a learning disability is an ongoing dilemma that the participants evaluated on a constant basis. For example, one of the participants revealed her identification only when she felt absolutely safe and anticipated a supportive reaction in those to whom she disclosed. In university and their professional lives, some of the participants evaluated and gauged when and to whom to disclose their exceptionality. This was a weighted decision that the participants perceived was in many cases a high-stakes judgment call.

Much like the findings of Henry (1999), the participants of this present study had clear goals of becoming teachers. They were aware of what was required to reach their goals, and they were determined to achieve these accomplishments. These participants chose to be teachers as they desired to be positive role models for other students who were academically struggling—this is in keeping with research by Pope (2001). As well, participants expressed that they believed that their exceptionality created sensitivity and empathy for students with exceptionalities, and this helped them to form their own beliefs about teaching. Despite this, the data did reveal that participants lacked belief in their academic abilities. These teachers with learning disabilities generally possessed a high degree of satisfaction with their teaching careers and had aspirations to help all students in their classrooms. These findings are consistent with those of Ferri et al. (2001).

Interestingly, the majority of the participants tried to fight against the false impression that surrounds individuals with learning disabilities. One participant regularly did public talks about her life as an individual with a learning disability. Another participant disclosed her identification to parents in an effort to dispel misconceptions. Despite this, the participants fell victim to the misunderstanding about learning disabilities. When asked if they would like to receive accommodations in their teaching career, most of them stated that they did not need any help and could make it on their own. These participants were still dealing with internal conflicts as a function of their learning disability.

The findings in the present study provide perspectives of educators who were former students with learning disabilities. Their message is that teachers need to be

fully aware of the implications of their actions on their students' academic progress and self-esteem. In short, the participants' experiences highlight the necessity for educators to be reflective in their practices.

Implications for Practice

This research highlights the educative and professional experiences of individuals with learning disabilities. The participants did not become aware of the impact of their learning disabilities until they were 18 years old; 2 participants were not even diagnosed until this age. These participants discussed the implications of this problem, which included a long-standing lack of understanding or being comfortable with their exceptionality. Because they were identified later in life, they had not received any help, didn't know what resources were available, or what accommodations they needed to help them reach their full potential.

In the participants' interviews, there was an echo of a feeling of shame because of their learning disability. As adults, a few of the participants still feel this way. This reveals the importance of students being aware of and intimately understanding their identification. Through school, students should have the opportunity to explore appropriate modifications and accommodations for their exceptionality with trained professionals. The findings in the present study have accentuated the value of studying the experiences of individuals with exceptionalities in order to learn from their stories. It is especially important that educators understand the emotional impact of this identification and are aware of these experiences in order to create an inclusive classroom environment. The participants in this study identified with the needs of students with learning

disabilities and possessed heightened empathy and compassion for them. This emotional identification contextualized how they worked with students with learning disabilities, and this made them critical of their colleague's insensitive practices.

All of these teachers with learning disabilities experienced academic success, and they attributed their accomplishments to the effective accommodations they have received. However, the accommodations which the participants thought were valuable were not provided until they were in university. This is consistent with the statistic that approximately one third of students who drop out of high school have learning disabilities (Statistics Canada, 1997). School boards must strive to ensure that schools are receiving appropriate technology and equipment to support the success of students with learning disabilities. In particular, programs which aid in the transition to university may be effective. As well, at the elementary and secondary school levels, educators must reflect on their practice to determine if students with exceptionalities are receiving appropriate accommodations.

Many individuals who are identified with a learning disability are given support throughout their educational experience; however, when they enter into the classroom, these individuals are not provided with any accommodations. Across several institutions within the teacher education programs, support groups for candidates with exceptionalities could be created. These groups could prepare teacher candidates by advising them about their legal rights on the accommodations that they are to be given in the classroom and provide them with support for tasks that will be overwhelming (e.g., report cards, parent interviews, curriculum

documents). Furthermore, these candidates should be given strategies to overcome barriers and obstacles that they might face. The goal of these groups could be to reduce anxiety in these new teacher candidates and help them to reach their full potential by advocating for reasonable accommodations.

Implications for Theory

Humanistic theory purports that one cannot interpret the world using the perspectives of others; one must create knowledge of the world through their own experiences (Myers, 1986). Rogers (1980) also states that humanistic educators admire students and attempt to comprehend how students view the world (Myers). The participants in this study understand the realities of being students with learning disabilities as they have lived these experiences. Based on their experiences, all of the participants seek to foster positive self-esteem and confidence in their own students, especially students with exceptionalities. Accordingly, these participants could be considered humanistic educators based on their respect for all students (Myers).

Humanistic educators are empathetic (Rogers, 1980). The participants displayed empathy for the students who struggled academically and those who were rejected by teachers and their peers, because the participants understood their students' experiences in relation to their own stories. Rogers believed that empathetic individuals have the ability to understand their own ongoing transformation. Participants evolved from being a child with low self-confidence, wanting to hide in the back of a classroom, to an adult who had high self-esteem and teaching at the front of the room.

As young students, the participants were unaware of their true potential because they had never received adequate accommodations to support their learning disabilities. In university, the participants reported feelings of accomplishment because they had acquired accommodations and overcome obstacles. These perceptions of success created higher self-confidence in their academic abilities. Participants began to enter into a state of being that Rogers (1980) refers to as “self-actualization.” This process begins when an individual is motivated to learn to be the best that they can be and begins to overcome barriers with the support of others. All of the participants believe that they overcame challenges because of the relationships that they created with friends and family.

Rogers (1961) states that an individual will not learn unless it is important to the individual to do so—motivation is a key aspect in learning. This premise may explain the accomplishment of the individuals in this study. The participants stated that in university their performance increased and they attributed this success to the accommodations that they received. This increase in achievement can also be linked to a change in their focus as many of the participants realized how significant university accomplishments were to attain their goal of becoming teachers. In accordance with Rogers, individuals were successful in university and their teacher education programs because they saw the value of learning.

Throughout the study, participants stated that there were misconceptions surrounding their learning disabilities amongst their previous teachers and present colleagues. In most teacher education programs, it is mandatory for teacher candidates to learn about learning exceptionalities. Therefore, it is difficult to justify

why the participants' colleagues expressed ignorance with respect to teachers with learning disabilities. However, participants did state that when they revealed and explained their exceptionalities to individuals both in and out of the teaching profession, they were most often accepted. Narrative descriptions of the experiences of teachers with learning disabilities provide a humanist perspective that may enable others to understand and respect their challenges and accomplishments.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study documented the experiences of teachers with learning disabilities and uncovered information that should be further examined through subsequent research. The following are recommendations for future research that may continue to advance the exploration of the role of teachers with learning disabilities. These recommendations may stimulate conversation amongst students, educators, researchers, and policy makers.

Several research studies, including the current one, have had participants with learning disabilities who were highly educated. The majority of individuals with learning disabilities hold as the highest level of education a high school or college diploma. This poses as a limitation to the present research and other studies. Future research could create a different profile of the experiences of individuals with learning disabilities if the participants were drawn from other demographics.

Teacher education programs encourage individuals with exceptionalities to apply and, when doing so, to indicate that they have an exceptionality. Several faculties of education run teacher education programs on satellite campuses. The experience of teacher candidates with learning disabilities could be documented to

determine how many of these campuses are equipped with the resources (e.g., equipment, counsellors) to assist students who have exceptionalities.

A future research study, which could extend the findings of this one, would be to create an in-depth profile of teachers with learning disabilities to determine if they have common character traits. The traits or attributes that have contributed to the teachers' successes could be identified. Then the research could focus on understanding what makes teachers with learning disabilities thrive and overcome the numerous obstacles they are faced with.

Another study can try to determine if the exceptionality of teachers with learning disabilities impacts their practice. Specifically the researcher can establish, for this particular group, the implications for their teaching philosophies. Furthermore, the study can focus on how teachers with learning disabilities work with students who are identified with learning disabilities.

A limitation for the current study was that the collected data relied on the participants' ability to articulate and recall their educational experiences. The possibility of memory decay does exist with respect to the details of these recollections. Future studies could include the viewpoints of the participants' friends, family, and educators. Multiple voices would create an in-depth examination of the participants' experiences. Also, documentation such as Individual Education Plans, report cards, and teaching evaluations could be included in future research. This documentation would corroborate evidence and provide more detail for the participants' stories.

As the researcher, my personal experiences spur the investigation of this topic. The participants and I are all teachers with exceptionalities. They felt safe disclosing their stories, and a certain level of trust was established because they understood that I had similar experiences. I had a distinct advantage as a researcher documenting such personal information, and consequently, my exceptionality was not a limitation but asset. This poses future consideration of the researcher's lived experience when investigating the experiences of teachers with learning disabilities.

Final Remarks

The incident with my grade 11 high school English teacher that was described in Chapter One created within me a strong desire to prove her and everyone else who doubted my abilities wrong. After graduating from grade 12, I attended college and received one of the highest grade point averages in my graduating class. I went on to undergraduate studies, and I was determined to obtain my teaching certificate.

Over time, my motivation changed from anger and revenge to self-satisfaction. As I matured, I realized that there was little reward in pursuing a career in teaching to simply prove to others that I was capable of achieving this goal. When I stood back I realized that my English teacher did not make her comments out of hatred, but in ignorance. She did not understand students with exceptionalities, especially invisible ones. It was from this moment that my focus shifted-I was now going to use my experiences and education to teach others about learning disabilities, especially other educators.

At times, I find being a teacher with a learning disability exhausting; it is almost like a juggling act. One moment I am teacher, and the next I am an

individual with a learning disability. I do not consider either label to be an accurate representation of me. I have found that my experiences became valid only as I continued to increase my educational status. It is difficult to be part of the educational enterprise and simultaneously hold onto both identities at the same time: teacher and individual with a learning disability. I am constantly misunderstood and often have to defend my own weaknesses. This research has been very therapeutic for me and has allowed me to have a deeper understanding of my own abilities and create friendships with individuals who have similar characteristics. I chose to do this research because of my own experiences, and I believe that there needs to be a place for the stories of individuals who are often “invisible”: teachers with learning disabilities. Teachers are expected to be perfect and know all the answers, an expectation which is impossible for individuals with learning disabilities to attain.

When I disclose my learning disability I often get asked how I beat the odds; in others words, how did I achieve success when others with learning disabilities have not? Recall Carl Rogers’s (1961) premise that every human being has the potential to be great and the desire to reach their full capabilities. Rogers added that even though life offers some challenges, individuals can achieve their goals when supported. All of the participants in this research and I had parental and family support throughout our educational journeys. Furthermore, we have all realized that our own academic struggles and experiences are an asset that make us unique and empathic teachers. How did the teachers with learning disabilities and I achieve our goals? The answer is simple: support and belief in our own abilities.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol for Participants

1. Describe your school experiences as a young child in elementary school.
2. How old were you when you were first identified with a learning disability?
3. Describe how you felt about being identified with a learning disability.
4. What was your school experience like before you were identified? What was school experience like after you were identified?
5. Overall, what were your perceptions of school as a young child?
6. Did your feelings towards school change when you entered high school? Describe your high school experience.
7. Describe your education experiences in college and/or university.
8. Do you use any accommodations? If so, describe these accommodations.
9. How did your friends impact on your school experiences as a child and during postsecondary education?
10. How did your parents impact on your school experiences?
11. How did your teachers impact your school experiences in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education?
12. Why did you choose to become a teacher?
13. What do you think were the perceptions of your friends and teachers with respect to your learning disability?
14. How has your experience with a learning disability impacted on who you are today?
15. How has your experience impacted the way you interact with students with disabilities?



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Appendix B

Research Ethics Board Approval

DATE: July 31, 2006

FROM: Julie Stevens, Acting Chair
Research Ethics Board (REB)

TO: Tiffany Gallagher, Education
Catherine KITCHURA

FILE: 06-005 KITCHURA

TITLE: The Perspective of an Educational Assistant with a Learning Disability

The Brock University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above research proposal.

DECISION: Accepted as clarified.

This project has received ethics clearance for the period of **July 31, 2006 to August 30, 2006** subject to full REB ratification at the Research Ethics Board's next scheduled meeting. The clearance period may be extended upon request. ***The study may now proceed.***

Please note that the Research Ethics Board (REB) requires that you adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and cleared by the REB. During the course of research no deviations from, or changes to, the protocol, recruitment, or consent form may be initiated without prior written clearance from the REB. The Board must provide clearance for any modifications before they can be implemented. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to <http://www.brocku.ca/researchservices/forms> to complete the appropriate form **Revision or Modification to an Ongoing Application**.

Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants and the continuation of the protocol.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored. A Final Report is required for all projects upon completion of the project. Researchers with projects lasting more than one year are required to submit a Continuing Review Report annually. The Office of Research Services will contact you when this form **Continuing Review/Final Report** is required.

Please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence.

JS/bb

