Resilience Factors of University and College Students with Learning Disabilities as Revealed Through Retrospective Interviews

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined resilience factors of eight university and college students with learning disabilities as revealed through retrospective interviews. This study has added to the existing literature surrounding resilience especially as it relates to individuals with learning disabilities. This study may provide additional insight into the emotional impacts of repeated and chronic risks on students with learning disabilities. The major themes that emerged using the interpretive phenomenological analysis method (Smith & Osborn, 2003) were organized under these four major headings: Challenges and Obstacles, Surviving Challenges, Supportive Conditions, and A Journey of Discovery and Hope. An adaptation of the listening guide analytical method (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003) was also utilized and offered a more personal depiction of the participants and an exploration of the unique contributions their stories made to this study. Specifically, a theme of feeling trapped/wanting to escape emerged as a reaction to adversity faced during elementary school years. Furthermore, this study has demonstrated that for several of the participants, the benefits of positive outlets extended beyond nurturing areas of strength and self-esteem to also include the provision of a short respite from their challenges and enhanced feelings of overall well-being. Additionally, this study may add to the existing literature surrounding character traits evident in resilient students, specifically highlighting the significance of optimism and self-acceptance.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

This study examined resilience factors of individuals with learning disabilities. More specifically, it investigated resilience factors perceived by university and college students as revealed through retrospective interviews of 8 participants. This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach in an attempt to understand the perceptions of students with learning disabilities in regards to what factors they considered to have been significant in their ability to overcome their disabilities and challenges (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The themes that emerged after data analysis contribute to a growing understanding and knowledge of students with learning disabilities and to an ability to provide well grounded and effective intervention and prevention programs for them (Thoma & Getzel, 2005).

**Background of the Problem**

Most of the combined and limited research on resilience and learning disabilities has been based on deficit models which investigate factors internal to the individual (Bryan, 2003; Margalit, 2003). This may be due to the current definitions in use, which describe learning disabilities as deficits intrinsic to the individual (Bryan). Presently, learning disabilities are defined as lifelong, pervasive impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering, or learning due to genetic or neurobiological factors (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada [LDAC], 2002). By exploring other frameworks, especially models addressing various internal and external factors, potentially a richer understanding of learning disabilities would be realized which will, hopefully, improve capacities to assist these individuals.
There has been a paradigm shift in how both learning disabilities and resilience have been defined and studied. Learning disabilities are now being defined and viewed in a more hopeful and strength-based light, which is evident in special education research and practice (Bryan, 2003; Wong, 2003). This research study, in contrast to the majority of studies on individuals with learning disabilities, is based upon a risk and resilience model, which considers both risk factors and protective factors internal and external to the individual (Bryan). I believe this shifting away from problem-oriented or deficit models to risk and resilience models is a refreshing, more holistic, and comprehensive approach (Margalit, 2003; Murray, 2003).

In general, many individuals with learning disabilities have poorer adult outcomes than their non-disabled peers (Bryan, 2003; Murray, 2003; Murray & Wren, 2003). I am excited and encouraged though by the many who do overcome the odds. Walt Disney, Cher, Albert Einstein, Magic Johnson, Tom Cruise, Alexander Graham Bell, and Winston Churchill are a few people that come to mind when I consider resilient people. All of these successful and famous individuals are renowned for their accomplishments, but less well known are their struggles with learning disabilities. How and why did these people become resilient by overcoming the obstacles in their lives to achieve success? Are extraordinary qualities and supports required?

The research by Masten (2001) in this area has revealed that the phenomenon of resilience is more ordinary than once believed. Masten has observed that resilience appears to arise from the “ordinary magic” of everyday, normal relationships and qualities. For example, research has drawn particular attention to the importance of social skills and positive, nurturing and supportive relationships with parents, peers,
teachers and mentors (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Bender, 2004; Domagala-Zysk, 2006; Elias, Parker, & Rosenblatt, 2005; Elksnin & Elksnin, 2004). Self-determination appears to play an additional and very significant role in the development of resilient mind-sets for individuals with learning disabilities (Hutchinson, Freeman, Stock, & Chan, 2004; Mason, Field & Sawilowsky, 2004; Murray, 2003; Thoma & Getzel, 2005). This ordinary magic that Masten (2001) speaks of resonates with hope and optimism as it is evident that resilience can be promoted and achieved in many individuals with learning disabilities through the encouragement of natural tendencies and ordinary interactions and relationships with other people.

**Statement of the Problem Context**

Since this study addressed resilience factors of university and college students, I discuss educational goals and the role they may play in fostering resilience. For all students, including those with learning disabilities, one salient educational goal is that students will become resilient. Resilience can be defined as "those skills, attitudes, and abilities that enable individuals to adapt to hardships, difficulties and challenges" (Alvord & Grados, 2005, p. 238). Although Dewey (1938) did not use the term "resilience", he recognized its importance many years ago. Dewey wrote that "(t)he main purpose or objective is to prepare the young for future responsibilities and for success in life..." (p. 18). In order to achieve success, all students need skills, attitudes, and abilities to make it possible for them to overcome the obstacles in their lives.

Educational practices, unit goals, activities, and assessments will hopefully align with the salient goals, with what students, hopefully, will be and become after they leave school. As I reflected on this present study, I found it distressing that some of the current
educational practices appear to run contrary to the goal of fostering resilient mind-sets in students. More specifically in the United States and Canada, educators are immersed in an era of accountability which has resulted in much more attention and emphasis being placed on academic achievement and test scores (Kohn, 2004). With the added pressure of test scores and focus on core academic skills, teachers are generally not emphasizing or implementing instructional strategies focusing on building self-determination skills; skills which are critical to fostering resilience (Zhang, Wehmeyer, & Chen, 2005).

In and of themselves, standards and assessments are important and useful. Standards and assessments can be beneficial if used as a catalyst for school improvements and professional development (Darling-Hammond, 2004). In Ontario, The Education Quality and Accountability Office claims to value the best interests of students and is primarily concerned with ensuring quality education for all. This has resulted in this office mandating an increasing number of tests. Unfortunately, this attention on academic achievement has many unintended side effects and often encourages teachers to focus much more time and energy on immediate test scores than on classroom climate and structure where developing social skills and self-determination may be nurtured (Bryan, Burstein, & Ergul, 2004; Darling-Hammond; Kohn, 2004; Pierce, 1994). The focus becomes more narrow and short-term by placing the emphasis on what is measured on standardized tests, rather than on encouraging teachers to focus on important long-term skills necessary for overcoming obstacles and adversities (Kohn).

In order to align practices with important educational goals, and, in particular, the goal of encouraging resilience, I argue for a more comprehensive understanding of the barriers and obstacles individuals with learning disabilities endure and the conditions and
coping strategies that are significant to the development and nurturing of resilient mindsets.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate resilience factors perceived by university and college students with learning disabilities as revealed through retrospective interviews. Specifically, eight participants were interviewed.

This study addressed these three main questions:

1. What are the main barriers and challenges students with learning disabilities perceive they have had to endure?
2. What coping mechanisms, strategies, and personal qualities have students with learning disabilities employed and drawn upon to overcome barriers and challenges?
3. What conditions have maintained and enhanced the motivational tendencies of university and college students with learning disabilities?

**Rationale**

This study is significant and important to me personally, and, I hope, also to the broader educational community. Although formal work on my thesis began only several months ago, the impetus for this project was in place long before this study. Fourteen years ago, during my first teaching assignment, I met Melinda, a 6-year-old girl with curly red hair, a contagious grin, and a passion for bright clothes. Melinda came from a loving, supportive family with highly successful and educated parents, and, yet, during this second attempt at grade 1 was continuing to struggle with learning to read and building friendships. Melinda received support from the learning resource teacher, extra
help in the classroom, and lots of exposure to print and books at home. Despite these efforts, progress was slow and Melinda lagged behind her peers both socially and academically. The following year, Melinda was diagnosed with a learning disability and continued to receive extra support both in and out of the classroom during the following years.

Although Melinda was one of the first students I worked with who had a learning disability, she was certainly not the last. Over the years, I had the opportunity to work as a primary classroom teacher, learning resource teacher, special needs coordinator, and therapeutic tutor and have enjoyed the privilege of getting to know several students who have been diagnosed with various learning disabilities. For most of these students, school appeared to be a very difficult place as it is there that they were continually confronted with their academic and sometimes accompanying social deficiencies. I have ached for these students and have often wondered if and how they will overcome their challenges. My continuing journey to find out more about how to help students with learning disabilities become resilient has led me to take various courses, workshops, and to embark on this present study.

This study is also significant because despite the vast amount of resilience research over the past 50 years (Goldstein & Brooks, 2005), there is relatively little literature examining resilience factors specifically for individuals with learning disabilities, and a significant gap in Canadian literature (Elias et al., 2005; Goldstein & Brooks; Margalit, 2003; Hutchinson et al., 2004). This study was an attempt to help address this gap and to illuminate resilience issues for this population of students with learning disabilities.
I believe that the information obtained from this study contributes to an understanding of students with learning disabilities. I hope the insights gleaned provide those offering services to students with disabilities including teachers, administrators, counselors, community members, as well as family members and peers with direction for planning effective and well-grounded activities, resources, and intervention and prevention programs. As this study addressed university students, the results may be particularly relevant to university administrators, professors, and service providers. The voices of these students may offer valuable insights and direction for the development of services, resources, and policies regarding both the admission and retention of postsecondary students with learning disabilities (Murray, 2003; Thoma & Getzel, 2005).

This study may also have been valuable for the participants. The optimistic and hopeful nature of this study provided the participants with an opportunity to share their accomplishments and the adversities they have overcome. I hope that through this process they gained a greater understanding of their strengths and external supports that have fostered their resilience. This growth in self-determination will, hopefully, enable these students to more intentionally draw upon their personal assets and supports in the future.

**Theoretical Framework**

In considering how students with learning disabilities overcome obstacles and challenges, this study was framed with a motivational theoretical framework, specifically the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory is an organismic-dialectic meta-theory that assumes normative human responses to be curious, responsible, and self-motivated; people naturally strive to learn, grow, and
master new skills. Unfortunately though, some people fail to thrive and thwart growth and responsibility. Using the self-determination theory approach, Ryan and Deci have identified three innate and ongoing psychological needs, referred to as nutriments, which appear necessary to the facilitation of healthy development and self-motivation: competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Human motivation is conceptualized by Ryan and Deci (2000) along a continuum, with intrinsic motivation at one end and amotivation at the other end. Intrinsic motivation is the ultimate goal and is understood as doing an activity for the sake of the activity itself. Amotivation is the failure to act at all or to act unintentionally, and it is considered to be the lowest form of motivation. In between these two points are various levels of extrinsic motivation comprising of external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation (Ryan & Deci).

The present study applies the self-determination theory as a theoretical framework as it is one of the few theories that attempts to understand why individuals behave the way they do (Bryan & Solomon, 2007). A goal of the self-determination theory is to discover what conditions, factors, and forces nurture human potential and development (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which is also a goal of this study.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

Guided by the self-determination theory, this study examines how various internal and external factors interact to help promote or lessen the attainment of healthy development within a risk and resilience model. Although the benefits of using a risk and resilience research model are promising, some limitations with using this model and with this study in general need to be discussed. Wong (2003) addresses some of the
measurement problems inherent in the self-reporting nature of these research studies, specifically calling into question how dependable and objective the data are as the reliability of memory and individual perceptions of events are challenged. Furthermore, by interviewing peers, family members, and/or others who know and work with individuals with learning disabilities, a more complete and accurate picture of the factors involved may be obtained. In my research, I did not conduct such follow-up interviews with non-learning disabled individuals, but explored the memories of students with learning disabilities which provided valuable insights into how these students viewed themselves and their past experiences.

Additionally, this study only looked at a single snapshot in time in the lives of the participants. It would have been more ideal to collect data over a longer period of time, especially across several developmental stages and transition time periods to assess how individuals with learning disabilities respond to the changing adversities and challenges in their lives. By collecting data over time using a risk and resilience framework, richer results may have been obtained (Murray, 2003). Due to my time constraints, this was not possible, and instead, participants were asked to share their stories and reflect upon their past experiences spanning from childhood to their university and college years.

A risk and resilience model involves and studies a multitude of variables and factors. Two factors which were not controlled were the specificity of learning disabilities and the gender of the participants. There are various degrees and types of learning disabilities and are at times co-morbid with other disabilities. I did not address one specific type or severity in this study and included participants with a variety of co-morbid disabilities. Gender may also influence the results as initial research on this issue
has suggested that male and female students with learning disabilities exhibit differences in social and coping skills (Wong, 2003). This study did not specifically address gender issues. By not placing restrictions on participant requirements regarding gender and type of learning and co-morbid disabilities, I was able to obtain information from a diverse group of students with learning disabilities. Additionally, the results of this study cannot be generalized beyond the sample used in my research. Only 8 participants, all attending postsecondary institutions, were interviewed.

Other significant limitations included the level of comfort that could be achieved by both the researcher and participants. This was my first attempt at collecting, analyzing, and interpreting qualitative data. With increased experience, better interviewing techniques might have been employed, as well as a more thorough and comprehensive analysis of the data. My faculty supervisor was helpful in offering guidance and instruction in these areas to lesson the impact of weaknesses. There was also only a limited amount of time for trust and rapport to be built up between the researcher and the participants, and the presence of an audio-recorder hindered the level of comfort that could be achieved by all involved in the interviewing process. Scheduling lengthy interviews of approximately 30-60 minutes and meeting with each participant two times dramatically improved the comfort level of both the researcher and participants, thus increasing the depth of the data received during the follow-up interviews.

Outline of the Remainder of the Document

This first chapter has offered an introduction to the problem addressed in this study by including background information of the problem, the problem context, the
purpose of the study, a rationale, and scope and limitations. The following four chapters include a review of the related literature, a description of the study’s methodology and procedures, a discussion of the themes that emerged from the interviews with the participants, and conclusions and implications for practice and further research.

More specifically, Chapter Two reviews the literature related to resilience and individuals with learning disabilities. Included in this chapter is a discussion of the shifting paradigm of resilience research evident in the evolving definitions of resilience and learning disabilities, and change from using deficit to risk and resilience research models and frameworks. Additionally, a more thorough explanation of the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and internal and external factors that have emerged as both barriers and protective factors will be discussed.

Chapter Three outlines the research methodology and procedures used in this qualitative study. Written here is a description of the qualitative research design, and information on the participants and interviewing process. The two data analysis methods are described, including the steps involved in the interpretive phenomenological method (Smith & Osborn, 2003) and the listening guide (Gilligan et al., 2003). Chapter Three also includes methodological assumptions and limitations of this study.

Chapter Four presents an overview and summary of the finding of this study. Themes that emerged from the interviews with the participants are addressed including barriers and challenges perceived by the participants as well as factors, ways participants survived their challenges, and supportive conditions critical to their success and resilience. The final section of Chapter Four presents excerpts of each participant’s l
poem and a brief written analysis of the contrapuntal voices discovered using the
listening guide method (Gilligan et al., 2003).

Chapter Five draws together this document by summarizing the first four
chapters, presenting a discussion on how the findings relate to the existing literature and
the study's guiding research questions, and outlining implications of this study for theory,
practice, and future research.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature on resilience and individuals with learning disabilities. Research (Bryan, 2003; Murray, 2003; Murray & Wren, 2003) has indicated that individuals with learning disabilities have poorer adult outcomes than their non-disabled peers. They are more likely to drop out of high school, have higher rates of unemployment, lower wages, poorer attendance and graduation rates from postsecondary school, lower rates of independent living, ongoing self-esteem and emotional difficulties, and less satisfaction with their lives (Bryan). Although these results have come up repeatedly in the literature, Murray maintains we are just beginning to understand the complex web of factors that predict outcomes for adults with learning disabilities and how to increase resilience. How can these outcomes be reversed to help individuals with learning disabilities overcome the obstacles in their lives?

While resilience has been studied extensively using various models and frameworks over the past 50 years, there have been very few studies that have specifically addressed individuals with learning disabilities (Elias et al., 2005; Goldstein & Brooks, 2005; Hutchinson et al., 2004; Margalit, 2003). The limited number of studies available on individuals with learning disabilities have primarily used deficit models which emphasize factors internal to the person (Bryan, 2003). In more recent years, there has been a shift to using risk and resilience models which allow researchers to investigate the phenomenon of resilience more holistically by examining the dynamic and multiple internal and external factors involved in helping individuals overcome adversity to achieve healthy development (Bryan; Wong, 2003).
In this chapter I present a review of the internal and external factors presented in the literature that influence resiliency and feelings of autonomy, relatedness, and competence in individuals with learning disabilities. This is not an attempt to offer an exhaustive summary of the research, but does emphasize some of the significant themes that have emerged from the literature. In the first part of this chapter I provide relevant background information on the shifting paradigm of resilience research by including discussions on the developing definitions of resilience and learning disabilities, and evolving research models and frameworks used to study resilience. In the second part, the self-determination theory is discussed followed by an outline of two broad themes that have emerged from the literature that appear important for all learners, and critical for individuals with learning disabilities, to become resilient: 1) internal factors: healthy self-determination and social-emotional skills; and 2) external factors: strong interpersonal and institutional support from parents, peers, teachers, school, and/or the community.

Paradigm Shift

With emerging and continuing research, a greater understanding of resilience and learning disabilities has developed. Research models and frameworks used to study resilience and individuals with learning disabilities have generally become more comprehensive and holistic in nature.

Resilience

Resilience has been defined in various ways, most emphasizing the competency of individuals to overcome adverse events. For example, Alvord and Grados (2005) define resilience as "those skills, attributes, and abilities that enable individuals to adapt
to hardships, difficulties, and challenges" (p. 238). Similarly, Hutchinson et al. (2004), refer to resilience as the "capacity to overcome obstacles to healthy development and the ability to spring back from adversity (p. 2). A more detailed definition highlighting some of the critical skills needed describes resilience as "the capacity of a child to deal effectively with stress and pressure, to cope with everyday challenges, to rebound from disappointments, mistakes, trauma, and adversity, to develop clear and realistic goals, to solve problems, to interact comfortably with others, and to treat oneself and others with respect and dignity" (Brooks, 2005, p. 297).

Although there continues to be some debate, definitions of resilience have evolved over the past 50 years and have generally become more dynamic and inclusive. In the past, resilience had been understood as a fixed personal character trait, an attribute a person is born with (Margalit, 2004). Currently, researchers (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Margalit) are regarding resilience as a complex, dynamic process involving a variety of internal and external factors. There is much more hope and optimism in the current research as resilience is no longer viewed as a permanent and set trait, but rather a set of skills that can be nurtured and strengthened over time. Along this same premise, resiliency is now understood by Brooks (2005) as developing a mind-set to provide individuals with skills necessary to deal effectively with challenges and adversity. When resilience is understood as a mind-set, it no longer becomes an attribute someone has or does not have. Brooks argues that some individuals have developed more skills than others, but all can work on developing and strengthening a resilient mind-set and the necessary skills and attitudes.
An aspect of the definition still disputed is who can be considered resilient. Masten (2001) argues that there must be significant risk to overcome in an individual’s life in order for him/her to be determined resilient. Another perspective, and one I adhere to, is that the concept of resilience can be applied to every individual, not just those who have experienced severe challenges. As Goldstein and Brooks (2005) maintain, all children encounter risk throughout their lives, and at any point can be placed in a high-risk category. Because of the prevalence of risk, Goldstein and Brooks believe that resilience should be intentionally fostered and nurtured in all children, not just those classified at-risk. I argue this is applicable to individuals with learning disabilities as they are not diagnosed with this disability until experiencing difficulty in school, and some do not receive a diagnosis until they become adults, if at all. This does not suggest important skills, qualities, and relationships did not contribute to their resilient mind-sets before their diagnosis or experiences of academic and/or social difficulties.

**Learning Disabilities**

As definitions of resilience have evolved over the years, so have definitions of learning disabilities. New definitions have emerged to reflect the latest research and expanding understanding of learning disabilities. Trying to define this disorder and find its causes are evident in the literature as early as the late 1800s. At that time, medical researchers had already recognized learning disabilities as a medical problem associated with neurological mechanisms. Over time, research has expanded an understanding of its causes, and learning disabilities are now theorized to be due to genetic and/or neurobiological factors and not the result of poor upbringing or environmental causes (LDAC, 2002).
Numerous definitions are now available, and although there will likely never be a universally accepted one, Walcot-Gayda (2004) stresses the importance that the definitions in use reflect the latest and most current research in the field of learning disabilities. Walcot-Gayda maintains the definitions should not only explain the likely causes of learning disabilities, but also highlight the diversity within this population. Bryan et al. (2004) suggest that definitions adopted by school boards be chosen carefully as they have far reaching implications on policy, identification, instruction, and remediation for students with learning disabilities. According to Walcot-Gayda, definitions have the potential to increase educators’ understandings of learning disabilities, thus increasing the odds that appropriate educational approaches will be utilized.

Internationally, the definition from the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (2001) has gained consensus and been adopted by many authors. This revised definition developed in 1989 is as follows:

Learning disabilities is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction may exit with learning disabilities but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious
emotional disturbance), or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences. (p. 31)

Although the NJCLD definition is recognized in Ontario, two more recent definitions have grown in popularity and use in Ontario. The Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAC, 2002) definition and the Official Definition of Learning Disabilities by the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC), which was adopted in January, 2002, were both the result of collaborative work over several years by various experts throughout Canada and North America. The individuals on these committees reviewed comparable bodies of the latest research on learning disabilities, including studies on brain development, genetics and neuropsychology, and related fields to develop these very similar definitions. Many elements in these Canadian definitions are included in the NJCLD definition, but also contain some notable differences to reflect advances in research in the 1990s on learning disabilities (LDAC, 2002).

I will highlight and elaborate on the main elements of this latest definition by the LDAC (2002) and indicate how this definition differs from the NJCLD (2001) definition. (For a complete version of the LDAC Official Definition of Learning Disabilities, see Appendix A.) The LDAC (2002) definition acknowledges that individuals with learning disabilities have impairment in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering, or learning, but have at least average abilities for thinking and/or reasoning which differentiates learning disabilities from global intellectual deficiencies. In accord with the NJCLD (2001) definition, it is understood that learning disabilities range in severity and may affect one or more of the following areas: oral language, written
language, mathematics, organizational skills, social perception, and social interaction (LDAC, 2002).

The specific causes of this disability are uncertain, but according to the LDAC (2002), it is believed to be due to genetic and/or neurobiological factors. It is agreed that learning disabilities are not caused by other impairments, but may co-exist or are co-morbid with other conditions such as emotional disorders, physical disabilities, or attention deficit disorders. Learning disabilities are also not caused by poor teaching, socioeconomic factors, cultural factors, or lack of effort or motivation, but these may intensify the difficulties (LDAC, 2002; NJCLD, 2001).

As Stage and Milne (1996) emphasize, learning disabilities are often not diagnosed until school age when academic difficulties surface. Despite this late diagnosis, learning disabilities are now understood to be pervasive lifelong disorders that individuals are born with, and these disabilities cannot be cured or outgrown (LDAC, 2002). Lavoie (1989) stresses that learning disabilities manifest differently in each individual and over the course of a lifetime depending on the demands of the environment, social supports in place, and individual strengths and weaknesses. Although no two individuals will present the same symptoms, several general characteristics are recognized. One common characteristic includes reversals in reading and/or writing; letters or whole words may be read or written backwards. Students often struggle with organizing thoughts, written work, and belongings. Inconsistency of performance is another common characteristic frequently causing much frustration for the individual and those who work with him/her. Inconsistency may also be evident across academic and nonacademic domains as students will oftentimes exhibit strengths in some
subjects or activities, and extremely poor performances in others. Many suffer from weak social skills, having difficulty accurately perceiving social situations, reading body language, social problem solving, and understanding sarcasm (LDAC, 2002; Mather & Ofiesh, 2005).

The revised Canadian definition ends with hope and optimism, thus acknowledging the shifting paradigm in resilience research and special education: “For success, individuals with learning disabilities require early identification and timely specialized assessments and interventions involving home, school, community and workplace settings” (LDAC, 2002, p.1). Individuals can achieve success, but not without appropriate interventions and the involvement of external supports. This reflects how the latest research in resilience has been shifting from deficit frameworks focussing on the individual deficits to more comprehensive risk and resilience frameworks including both internal and external factors.

Resilience Models and Frameworks

The evolving definitions and interpretations of resilience and learning disabilities are also evident in and the result of the changing models and frameworks used to study resilience. Most of the research on resilience and learning disabilities has been based on deficit models which investigate factors internal to the individual (Bryan, 2003; Margalit, 2003). Bryan argues that it is not surprising that deficit models have been predominant in the research because learning disabilities are defined as deficits intrinsic to the individual. As discussed in the previous section, learning disabilities are lifelong, pervasive impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering, or learning due to genetic or neurobiological factors (LDAC, 2002). And as these
disabilities often interfere with the acquirement of reading, it is often assumed that something is wrong with the child. The information gleaned from these deficit model research studies has been invaluable in helping educators understand the difficulties and common characteristics of this population. Bryan urges researchers to not be too quick in completely deserting deficit models in future research.

Wong (2003) recommends exploring additional frameworks in an attempt to enrich an understanding of learning disabilities and increase abilities to assist individuals with learning disabilities. Evidence of this is already apparent. As discussed earlier in the definitions of resilience and learning disabilities, learning disabilities are now viewed in a more strength-based light. In general, special education has become more inclusive, embracing more positive and empowering approaches (Bryan, 2003; Wong). This paradigm shift has not only been apparent in education, but also in other helping professions. According to Margalit (2003) and Bryan, this growth in popularity may be partly due to the inherent optimism in these models; instead of only trying to identify and eliminate risk factors, researchers are looking much broader and trying to find ways to reverse and provide buffers against risk factors. In the field of special education, this is particularly relevant as many risk factors simply cannot be removed.

The risk and resilience model was first used by Werner and Smith to account for the positive outcomes of several individuals born in 1955 on the island of Kauai in conditions of extreme risk. In a discussion of their findings, Werner and Smith present several protective clusters that they believe effectively acted as buffers against the risk factors, including learning disabilities for 22 individuals in their study (cited in Wong, 2003). Thus, instead of only considering factors internal to the individuals, researchers
using a risk and resilience framework attempt to see people with learning disabilities holistically (Hutchinson et al., 2004). Researchers examine the complex web of how family, school, and community factors interact with the factors internal to the individual to shield against or exacerbate the risks (Bryan, 2003; Murray, 2003). These frameworks focus on strengths as opposed to weaknesses and an emphasis is placed on the importance of relationships; consequently, researchers look far beyond individual deficiencies (Sesma, Mannes, & Scales, 2005).

In risk and resilience models, risk factors are not just internal factors, but rather include “biological, environmental, and psychosocial hazards that increase the likelihood that a maladaptive outcome will occur” (Murray, 2003, p. 18). In these models, risk factors are understood to increase the likelihood of negative outcomes, but it is also recognized that they will not necessarily guarantee a negative outcome. Individuals at risk often experience more than one risk factor, frequently enduring multiple chronic risks (Mather & Ofiesh, 2005). But as Werner and Smith (cited in Wong, 2003) discovered, many individuals do seem to successfully cope with the stress and multiple risk factors in their lives.

Opposite to risk factors are protective factors or resources that can alter the effects of risk exposure (Murray, 2003). In some frameworks, protective factors are referred to as assets. Research by Fisher (2003) and Sesma et al. (2005) has indicated that the more assets or resources an individual possesses, the more likely he/she is to succeed and thrive. These factors appear to have a dynamic and cumulative effect on individuals (Margalit, 2003).
Masten (2001) points out that often, but not always, risk and protective factors are at diametrical ends of the same index. For example, good social skills versus poor social skills, high self-esteem versus low self-esteem, poor quality of instruction versus high quality of instruction, and harsh and inconsistent parenting style vs. warm but demanding parenting style. Additionally, risk and protective factors can be internal or external. Examples of internal factors include an individual’s intelligence, ability to self-regulate behavior, and make friends. External factor examples include the support of parents, school, and friends (Alvord & Grados, 2005).

In this study, a risk and resilience model was used as illustrated in Figure 1 to investigate how risk and protective factors influenced the outcomes of university and college students with learning disabilities. Using Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory as a theoretical guide, I adapted the work done by Murray (2003) in an effort to demonstrate graphically the dynamic and interactive relationship between internal and external risk and protective factors, the student, and possible outcomes. The two-way arrows in the diagram portray how all the components in the model influence and interact with each other. The risk and protective factors influence each other and the individual, and the individual also influences these factors. The outcome, either healthy or poor depending on greater or diminished feelings of autonomy, relatedness and competence, will also continue to impact the individual and risk and protective factors.

**Factors Critical for Resilience: Self-Determination Theory**

The Self-Determination Theory is based on an organismic-dialectical meta-theory that addresses people’s motivational tendencies and personality integration. This theory assumes that when people want to do something rather than feel they have to do it, they
Figure 1. Relationship between risk factors, protective factors, the student with learning disabilities, and outcomes.


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are more likely to do it (Bryan & Solomon, 2007). It appears that for healthy personal and social development and optimal functioning, three psychological needs called nutriments need to be nurtured—competence, autonomy, and relatedness. The self-determination theory guides research into addressing how the social context influences feelings of autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Greater feelings of autonomy, relatedness, and competence have been associated with improved motivational states (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Within the self-determination theory, several different types of motivation have been identified and are conceptualized along a continuum with intrinsic motivation recognized as the highest level and amotivation as the lowest level. Amotivation refers to the failure to intentionally act and is a lack of motivation often accompanied by the belief that the activity is invaluable and will result in failure (Bryan & Solomon, 2007). Four levels of extrinsic motivation are identified between these two extremes including external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation.

Intrinsic motivation is the “natural inclination toward assimilation, mastery, spontaneous interest, and exploration that is so essential to cognitive and social development and that represents a principal source of enjoyment and vitality throughout life” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70). Ryan and Deci have demonstrated through studies that intrinsic motivation can be enhanced by perceived competence, optimal challenges, and performance feedback. Extrinsic rewards unrelated to the task and influences and controls, such as threats, deadlines, evaluations and imposed goals, have been found by numerous studies to decrease intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci). Intrinsic motivation is fostered when individuals feel self-determined, autonomous, and find close connections
and support from others (Ryan & Deci). Intrinsic motivation is important for healthy development, but interestingly has been identified by Ryan and Deci as only one type of motivation evident in self-determined learners. Self-determined learners may also be encouraged to act by forms of extrinsic motivation. Unlike intrinsic motivation where performance to do an activity is motivated by the satisfaction of the activity itself, extrinsic motivation refers to performance motivated by an external reward or outcome (Ryan & Deci).

Within the self-determination theory, the organismic integration theory (OIT) explains the different forms of extrinsic motivation depending on the degree to which the behavior is autonomous or controlled (Gagne & Deci, 2005). Externally regulated behaviors are considered to be the least self-determined as performance is dependent upon achieving outside goals or rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The three other types of extrinsic motivation are more self-determined as the behaviors are the result of internalizing the value of the activity to varying degrees (Gagne & Deci). Introjected regulated behaviors are those motivated by a desire to avoid personal feelings of guilt or to achieve a sense of pride (Ryan & Deci). Identified regulated behaviors are performed because the activities are deemed to be personally valuable or important (Ryan & Deci). Integrated regulated behaviors are characterized by an internal locus of control and are done to achieve personal congruence with one’s needs and values (Ryan & Deci).

Ryan and Deci (2000) suggest that conditions fostering autonomy, competence, and relatedness can increase intrinsic motivation and greater internalization and integration of extrinsically motivated behaviors. Even more significant to this study, if these three needs are met, individuals experience an overall increase in their well-being
and healthy development (Ryan & Deci). Competence is experienced by individuals who feel they are successful and have an influence on their surroundings (Bryan & Solomon, 2007). When success occurs, it is important that the individual feel that they were responsible for the result (Bryan & Solomon). Autonomy is another critical need in the self-determination theory and can be defined as “a sense of feeling free from pressures and to have the possibility to make choices among several courses of action” (Guay, Vallerand, & Blanchard, 2000, pp. 177-178, cited in Bryan & Solomon). Autonomy cannot be confused with mere independence, but rather being able to make personal decisions and choices (Bryan & Solomon). The third nutrient, relatedness, refers to the need to feel closely connected, cared for, and loved by others (Ryan & Deci).

Bryan and Solomon (2007) outline several examples of how teachers could use the self-determination theory to create an environment that nurtures the three needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. For example, Bryan and Solomon suggest teachers allow students to be involved in making decisions setting personal goals regarding their learning and be given multiple choices and rationales for possible activities. Students must be felt cared for and supported by their teachers and be provided with opportunities to give and receive help from their peers (Bryan & Solomon).

The self-determination theory is based on the belief that most people are active organisms with innate tendencies toward growth, development, learning, and responsibility (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci suggest that these qualities appear to be more normal than exceptional. Masten’s (2001) work supports this assumption and maintains that “(r)esilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the
everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities” (p. 235). In other words, resilience is not only for those with special extraordinary internal qualities and external supports and conditions, but rather appears to be the result of a much more ordinary process. This ordinary magic that Masten speaks of resonates with hope and optimism that resilience can be promoted and achieved in individuals with learning disabilities. The following is a look at some of the internal and external factors, many of them ordinary, which have emerged from the literature as critical for promoting resilience in persons with learning disabilities.

**Internal Factors Critical for Promoting Resilience**

Although relatively little combined research on resilience and individuals with learning disabilities is available, some initial promising themes have emerged from the literature (Hutchinson et al., 2004). It appears that strong self-determination and effective social-emotional skills are important internal factors; these characteristics have been identified as important for success both during the school years and beyond. Although I have separated these personal factors into two sections, the boundaries between these two personal factors are permeable as they influence each other and are impacted by external factors as illustrated in Figure 1. For example, students with strong self-determination skills often relate well to others and do better socially.

**Internal factor: Self-determination.** The importance of self-determination has come up repeatedly in special education research. Adults with learning disabilities have often attributed their success in large part to their self-determination skills (Hutchinson et al., 2004; Mason et al., 2004; Murray, 2003; Thoma & Getzel, 2005; Zhang et al., 2005).
Self-determination improves academic outcomes and, according to Murray and Thoma and Getzel, has surfaced as one of the most important factors for increasing resilience in individuals with learning disabilities. Research by Thoma and Getzel on individuals with a variety of disabilities has demonstrated a correlation between self-determination skills and improved outcomes such as employment, community living, and postsecondary education.

Self-determination is a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. It is also an understanding of one’s strengths and weaknesses and a belief in oneself as being capable and effective (Karvonen, Test, Wood, Browder, & Algonzzine, 2004). Resilient youth and adults with learning disabilities have the ability to set goals, overcome challenges, and to seek help when needed (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Hutchinson et al., 2004; Stage & Milne, 1996). Other critical self-determination attitudes include a strong desire to succeed, an optimistic outlook on the future, and feeling like a survivor (Alvord & Grados). Echoing much of the work done by Ryan and Deci (2000) on the Self-Determination Theory, Wehmeyer, Field, Doren, and Mason (2004) suggest that when these skills and attitudes are internalized, individuals are more likely to take control of their lives and become happy, successful adults.

Many attempts have been made over the years to characterize the behaviors of self-determined individuals, and the list is long. Self-determined learners possess many meta-cognitive skills and are considered choice makers, decision-makers, problem solvers, goal setters, self-advocators, self-monitors, self-instructors, goal attainers, self-reinforcers, self-evaluators, and have an internal locus of control. Tombari and Borich
(1999) have simplified these self-determined behaviors by clustering them into four categories: setting goals, reaching goals, observing performance, and rewarding oneself.

Bender’s (2004) research has shown that individuals with learning disabilities differ from their non-disabled peers. Specifically, individuals with learning disabilities generally have a higher external locus of control, lower self-concepts, and commonly weaker self-determination skills, beliefs, and attitudes. These weaker skills and poorer self-concepts may result in fear of failure and apprehension when approaching new and/or challenging tasks (Mather & Ofiesh, 2005). Repeated academic failures by many students with learning disabilities erodes feelings of confidence and being effective and capable, often being replaced by perceptions of being different and feelings of fear, frustration, anger, and confusion (Mather & Ofiesh). Despite these general differences, about 30% of students with learning disabilities do exhibit resiliency and feel confident in themselves (Bender). In an effort to address what separates those exhibiting resilient mind-sets from those who do not, a few studies have asked postsecondary students with disabilities which skills they consider to be most important to their success. Below is a brief summary of four of these studies. It is hoped that the information gleaned from these studies will enhance an understanding of which factors are perceived most important to increase protective factors, to buffer against the deficits, and to reduce risk factors.

Thoma and Getzel (2005) conducted semistructured focus group interviews with 34 postsecondary university students. All the students were receiving support for their various disabilities, and seven (20% of group) had a learning disability. After analyzing the data, self-determination skills clearly emerged as an important factor for their success.
More specifically, many of these individuals spoke of their ability to solve problems, understand their disability, and set and achieve their goals. These students spoke of the benefits of using technology to find out more about their disability, which was useful in advocating for appropriate supports and resources. Families and peers were identified as providing support and encouragement in helping these students reach their goals.

Field, Sarver, and Shaw (2003) comment on in-depth interviews conducted by Sarver with four university students who had learning disabilities. Self-determination emerged as an important, central personality trait. The students interviewed accepted responsibility for carrying out their plans to achieve goals and had a good understanding of their disability, personal strengths and weaknesses. When problems arose, they were able to generate solutions to problems, solicit help from others when needed, and persevere until problems were solved and goals accomplished (Field et al.).

Stage and Milne (1996) explored the experiences of college students with learning disabilities and how they adapted to college by conducting two semistructured interviews with eight undergraduate students. Three major themes surfaced as critical to their success: individual disposition factors, institutional factors including support from faculty members and the college, and the development of coping strategies to compensate for their disabilities (Stage & Milne). These students had an internal locus of control, took responsibility for their college status, understood their disability and strengths and weakness, and as a result were able to develop effective coping strategies. They were able to achieve their goals, recognize their accomplishments, and rewarded themselves for achieving their goals. These are all behaviors of self-determined learners.
Similar themes of self-determination, especially the importance of setting and achieving goals, emerged from a study conducted by Hutchinson et al. (2004) after analyzing two sets of retrospective, semi-structured interviews with 16 adults who all had learning disabilities. This study compared two groups of adults: eight who had dropped out of high school and later returned to complete it, and eight who completed high school in the traditional route. Goal setting in both groups surfaced as critical for completing high school (Hutchinson et al.). The early successful group noted how personal goals kept them on track for graduating; the late successful group indicated how their goals had changed after dropping out of high school and their new goals provided them the impetus needed for going back to school to obtain their diploma.

Mather and Ofiesh (2005) suggest that self-acceptance, self-awareness, and understanding and feeling control over one's life are critical self-determination skills and attitudes needed for resilience. Being able to set and accomplish goals appears to be especially important for healthy outcomes and is strongly influenced by self-understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses (Mather & Ofiesh). Mather and Ofiesh maintain that successful adults with learning disabilities not only understand their disabilities and themselves, they also accept their personal limitations and are able to see beyond them.

Hutchinson, et al. (2004) expand on these findings by Mather and Ofiesh (2005) by highlighting the importance of others being able to see individuals with learning disabilities holistically, as more than people with cognitive deficits. It is the hope of Hutchinson, et al. that students with learning disabilities will receive better treatment; less emphasis will be placed on the academic aspects of school, and more on the social-
emotional component. This research leads into a discussion on what the literature reveals about the importance of social skills, another significant internal characteristic.

*Internal factor: Social-emotional skills.* Along with self-determination skills including the ability to set goals, taking control and initiative, and believing in oneself, research by Elias et al. (2005) and Elksnin and Elksnin (2004) indicates that social-emotional skills are also necessary for promoting resilience in children and adults. Bender (2004) maintains that social competence plays a significant role in students’ abilities to develop self-determination skills, nurture positive relationships, and find job success. Being able to develop and maintain supportive relationships with others appears essential for students to deal successfully with various tasks, including the challenges of academic assignments (Domagala-Zysk, 2006). Elksnin and Elksnin argue that social skills are extremely important and are better predictors of academic performance and attitudes towards school than intelligence scores or prior school experience. Supporting this theme, Murray and Wren (2003) examined how various cognitive, academic, and attitudinal factors influenced the college performance of 84 students with learning disabilities and found a modest association between Full Scale IQ and grade point averages, and not a significant relationship between prior academic achievement and grade point averages. Murray and Wren encourage researchers to continue exploring the relationships between self-determination and social cognitive problem solving skills as these are more promising predictors of college success than the traditional measures colleges and universities currently use.

Research (Bryan et al., 2004; Margalit, 2004; McNamara, Willoughby, Chalmers, & YLC-CURA, 2005) has consistently revealed that strong social-emotional skills serve
as protective factors, and poor social-emotional skills present as risk factors, which may impede healthy development. Unfortunately, a significant percentage of youth with learning disabilities suffer from social problems. In the United States the prevalence of social problems is estimated to range from 38%-75% of students with learning disabilities (Bryan et al.; Margalit). These statistics have been consistent across ages, races, settings, raters, methods, and measures; thus, likely, similar percentages would also be evident in Canada. The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (2002) acknowledges that social-emotional problems are a characteristic of learning disabilities. This trait has been noted already in preschool children, even before academic difficulties present themselves. On the whole, young children with learning disabilities demonstrate poorer quality solutions to social dilemmas (Bryan et al.; Margalit). Students with nonverbal learning disabilities are particularly prone to social difficulties, increasing their susceptibility to depression and suicide (Mather & Ofiesh, 2005).

Bryan et al. (2004), McNamara et al. (2005), and Elksnin and Elksnin (2004) have examined the reasons for these weaker social skills, and presently there are numerous hypotheses. Some of these social-emotional difficulties may be the result of weak language and communication skills. Some students' social problems and low self-esteem may be the result of repeated failures and frustrations at school. Other more recent explanations and possibilities include trouble understanding other people's emotions and being able to read subtle social cues, difficulties with cognitive processing and social-emotional problem solving, and dysfunction with the central nervous system (Elksnin & Elksnin). Unfortunately, some students with learning disabilities also suffer from other co-morbid psychiatric conditions, such as depression and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity
Disorder, further increasing their risk for negative outcomes (Elksnin & Elksnin; McNamara et al.).

Additionally, research (Bender, 2004; Bryan et al., 2004; Mather & Ofiesh, 2005; McNamara et al., 2005) has revealed that students with learning disabilities are likely to experience more negative emotions than their peers. Comparatively, students with learning disabilities have higher rates of loneliness, anxiety, and depression, report less satisfaction with life, and are more prone to suicide. Students with learning disabilities demonstrate lower persistence in tasks and less social flexibility. In inclusive classrooms, students with learning disabilities are less well accepted and more neglected than their peers without disabilities, although the reasons why are less clear (Mather & Ofiesh). It is speculated that it may be the result of inappropriate behavior, weak communication skills, and/or the stigma attached to receiving special services (Bender; Bryan et al.). Mather and Ofiesh also note that students feel less accepted by their teachers, exasperating feelings of frustrations and lowering feelings of competence and self-esteem.

External Factors Critical for Promoting Resilience

Weak self-determination skills, poor social competence, and additional risk factors can be buffered with strong external supports and relationships (Heiman & Dariv, 2004; Murray, 2003; Sesma et al., 2005). Within risk and resilience models, external factors are explored and have emerged as being very influential in the development of resilient mind-sets. Proactive parents, positive connections, and relationships with peers, school support, and community involvement all appear to play significant roles in the healthy development of individuals with learning disabilities (Heiman & Dariv; Murray;
Sesma et al.). I have organized external factors into two broad categories: interpersonal support and school support. Again, the barriers between these two categories are at times difficult to differentiate.

**External factor: Interpersonal support.** Social support has been identified as one of the most important external protective factors for individuals with learning disabilities (Heiman & Dariv, 2004; Murray, 2003; Sesma et al., 2005). Research on resiliency has revealed the importance of having at least one supportive adult in the lives of individuals with learning disabilities who is able to provide guidance and acceptance (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Mather & Ofiesh, 2005). Students with learning disabilities benefit in many ways from a strong personal support system including increased self-esteem, emotional stability, confidence, information and assistance and decreased levels of stress and anxiety (Alvord & Grados; Mather & Ofiesh). This support system can include, but is not exclusive to, relationships and interactions with family members, peers, teachers, and community members.

Domagala-Zysk (2006) examined questionnaires completed by 200 Polish youth to determine the correlation between the quality of their relationships with others and academic success. The results yielded impressive evidence that supportive relationships with parents are critical for children and adolescents to deal successfully with various tasks, including schoolwork. Domagala-Zysk concludes that peer relationships do not replace parent relationships in the teenage years, but rather are formed on the foundation of good parental relationships. The opposite correlation was also found to be true (p<0.05); weak parental support was found correlated with school failure (Domagala-Zysk).
Brooks (2005) has spent several years researching the significant role parents play in nurturing resilience in their children, and although not specifically examining parents of children with learning disabilities, his research can inform all parents. Brooks suggests that developing a resilient mind-set is not based in the number of adversities children face, but rather in the skills and attitudes parents strengthen in their children. Effective parenting practices and nurturing relationships with significant others are not extraordinary, but as Masten (2001) describes, rooted in the ordinary processes that take place in families and communities.

This ordinary magic takes place in many of the normal activities that happen in home, school, and community (Masten, 2001). Consistent with the self-determination theory, Brooks (2005) asserts that children and youth need to be in loving, supportive relationships with others that help them to feel special, worthwhile, and appreciated to become resilient. Adults who actively listen and confirm what children are saying promote effective communication patterns. A powerful way adults may nurture resiliency is to provide opportunities for children to help and serve others. These relationships and opportunities have the potential to build up self-esteem and provide safe places for children to take risks, learn from their mistakes and develop their gifts and talents (Brooks; Mather & Ofiesh, 2005).

Parental involvement and expectations have been demonstrated in the general education literature to be associated with academic outcomes (Gonzalez, 2002; Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Doan Holbein, 2005; Zhan, 2006). Zhan conducted a study with 1370 youth and their parents to determine the relationship between parental assets, expectations, and involvement in their child's education. Using data extracted from the
National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, a series of OLS regression models were estimated and results revealed evidence that parental involvement improves academic performances and parental expectations towards college attendance was a strong predictor of actual college attendance (Zhan). Parental expectations and attitudes appeared to be stronger influences on academic outcomes than parental involvement (Zhan).

Research by Gonzalez (2002) and Gonzalez-DeHass et al. (2005) reveals that parents who were more involved in their children’s education improved academic learning and school engagement. Parents who were involved in their children’s education including providing homework assistance, attending school and extracurricular school functions, and communicating effectively with school staff, had students who did better in school and were more likely to be intrinsically motivated. Consistent with the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), students who had increased levels of intrinsic motivation had an internal locus of control and were more likely to experience feelings of pride, accept responsibility for mistakes, take risks, and demonstrate persistence (Gonzalez). Over-controlling parents who used extrinsic rewards in reaction to grades were linked to children who had higher levels of extrinsic motivation; warm and encouraging parents who provided praise were linked to children with higher levels of intrinsic motivation (Gonzalez-DeHass et al.). Gonzalez-DeHass et al. offer several plausible explanations for their findings on motivation levels, many of them echoing the work done by Ryan and Deci on the self-determination theory. Gonzalez-DeHass et al. suggest that children who are encouraged and supported by the involvement of their
parents experience increased levels of perceived control, competence, comfort, and relatedness.

Brooks (2005) recognizes that students with learning disabilities can become frustrated by their limitations and struggles, but feel encouraged when they realize that successful adults do not have to be good at everything. Brooks encourages adults to find ways to minimize deficits and instead assist students with leaning disabilities in discovering and sustaining their interests and gifts which will foster joy, self-esteem, and competency. To promote resiliency, supportive adults do not need to ignore or deny problematic areas, but focus on giving encouraging feedback and reinforcing the “islands of competence” (Brooks). For most students with learning disabilities, their difficulties are domain specific, and they may excel at specific academic subjects or have other talents and abilities (Mather & Ofiesh, 2005). Murray (2003) suggests that encouraging students to engage in work experiences and become involved in sports teams, church groups, and other community organizations has the potential to promote healthy development.

Brooks (2005) describes effective parents and teachers as flexible people, able to try a new strategy if the one they are using is unproductive. Thus, instead of blaming the problem on the child, parents and teachers look at what they can do to help the child change negative behaviors. By doing this, more productive strategies will, hopefully, be found and children will also benefit from seeing problem solving strategies being modeled. This will help them as they try to generate solutions and choose the most appropriate solutions for their own problems. Brooks suggests that parents and teachers avoid solving all problems for their children as many opportunities are needed to develop
a problem-solving attitude. Children do need to be disciplined, but in effective ways that ensure their safety and also reinforce self-discipline and self-control (Brooks).

Many interpersonal supports are available and nurtured within school and community settings. Teachers, coaches, mentors, and other significant adults may all serve as either protective factors or risk factors, depending on the quality of relationships. As found in studies by Stage & Milne (1996) and Hutchinson et al. (2004), relationships with teachers and parents have the potential to be the most positive influence or most negative influence in their lives.

*External factor: School support.* This section examines how schools are fostering resilience in students with learning disabilities by looking at how diverse learning needs can be met, and how social-emotional skills and self-determination skills are being promoted. I will discuss not only what the research indicates is currently happening in many schools, but also what best practices experts are recommending. I have defined school factors as the school programs, curriculum, interventions and organizational structures that influence resilience. The success of these school factors for students at risk is based upon the foundation of positive relationships with adults who respect and care for these students (Goldstein & Brooks, 2005).

Elias et al. (2005) expect that many educators understand the importance of social-emotional skills for success in life and do not question the value of teaching these skills to children. Teaching these skills to children in school has the potential to reduce risk factors in their lives and promote healthy relationships with others. Effective social-emotional intervention programs have also been consistently found to have the increased academic performances. Unfortunately, unlike the abundance of empirically based
academic interventions, Elksnin and Elksnin (2004) have found that there are few validated social-emotional interventions available. Teaching social-emotional skills appears to be a complex process involving many factors, a process that needs to be better understood.

Tomlinson (1999) recognizes that every classroom is filled with students representing a wide variety of learning styles, ability levels, interests, and backgrounds. Tomlinson argues that educators use a differentiated approach to teaching in order to maximize learning for all students, including those with learning disabilities. This means treating each student as an individual, beginning instruction where students are, modifying and scaffolding curriculum to help ensure success and emotionally sound educational experiences. Tomlinson recognizes that good teaching is difficult, a type of art form, where teachers strive through a variety of activities to do whatever it takes to ensure each student learns. Differentiated classrooms allow students to capitalize and build upon individual needs and strengths by offering options and choices for projects, group, and individual assignments, varied rates of instruction, and tasks with different degrees of complexity and difficulty (Tomlinson). Allowing students to be an active part of their educational planning by giving them options and choices would naturally seem to promote the development of self-determination skills.

The importance of self-determination has been demonstrated repeatedly in special education research; thus, it is expected that many school programs would be intentionally promoting self-determination. Unfortunately, research by Hutchinson et al. (2004), Mason et al. (2004), Murray (2003), and Thoma and Getzel (2005) has shown this not to be true. Several studies have addressed how and if self-determination is fostered in
schools, looking primarily at student involvement in setting goals and planning Individual Education Programs (IEPs). Karvonen et al. (2004) were part of the Self-Determination Synthesis Project which conducted a review of the literature published from 1972-2000 on the topic of self-determination. These authors summarized several studies on this topic and found dismal results. For example, a study conducted by Agran, Snow, and Swaner (cited in Karvonen et al.) revealed that 75% of middle and high school teachers rated self-determination skills a high priority, but unfortunately, 55% of them did not include self-determination goals in their students' IEPs.

Mason et al. (2004) conducted an online Web survey to gather information on the self-determination practices and attitudes of educators and student involvement in the IEP process. Of 523 usable responses, similar themes emerged. Again, teachers, administrators, and related service professionals highly value self-determination skills and student involvement in their IEPs, but only 8% were satisfied with the methods they were using to teach these skills, most respondents attesting to using unsystematic and informal approaches. Thirty-four percent of respondents reported being satisfied with the level of student involvement in IEP meetings. The results of the survey revealed that students were not very involved in the IEP process, most likely playing a very passive role in meetings, if attending at all (Mason, et al.).

The IEP process has the potential to be a phenomenal vehicle for promoting self-determination skills. Mason et al. (2004) summarized the research results from the past 20 years, and these authors discovered students who are involved in self-determination activities and the development of setting their own goals and planning are more likely to accomplish their goals, improve their academic skills, develop self-advocacy and
communication skills, graduate from high school, and have better adult outcomes. Are schools improving self-determination skills for students with learning disabilities? How can schools improve the odds students with learning disabilities will achieve healthy development and positive outcomes?

Analyzing data through a cross-case analysis, Karvonen et al. (2004) examined six programs identified as placing a major emphasis on promoting self-determination skills with students with disabilities. Although much variance was found between the programs and methods used, all of the sites had students participating in some form of educational or personal planning. For example, one school began in the middle school grades by supporting and encouraging students to become self-aware of their strengths and weaknesses (Karvonen et al.). By high school, these students were expected to write their own goals and educational programs and conduct their own IEP conferences. Specific objectives were determined by the student, as well as collecting data to monitor and report on progress. Goals were written in the first person, helping students gain ownership over their education (Karvonen et al.). At another site, students also wrote their IEP goals during a language arts activity (Karvonen et al.).

Self-determination is particularly essential at the college and university levels where students must be able to manage much more of their own time and advocate for themselves (Field et al., 2003). After analyzing the responses of four university students with learning disabilities on their perceptions about the college environment, Field et al. recommend ways postsecondary schools can promote self-determination. Field et al. suggest that students should be provided with opportunities to make choices about courses to take, they need outlets to express ideas and opinions to the administrators, and
accommodations should be determined collectively by students, staff, and disability services. Additionally, faculty and staff need ongoing professional development and support in learning how to teach self-determination (Field et al.).

Palmer and Wehmeyer (2003) and Zhang et al. (2005) lament that most of the activities and strategies used to promote self-determination skills focus on adolescent students. Primary age students are often left out of self-determination activities and given very few opportunities to participate in goal setting activities (Palmer & Wehmeyer; Zhang et al.). Zhang et al. strongly recommend self-determination activities begin both at home and school at an early age. Palmer and Wehmeyer have proposed a self-determined learning model of instruction for primary students as they believe the process of nurturing these salient life skills can and should begin at the kindergarten level. Using this model, students are taught to follow a series of four steps with the help of their teacher to identify the problem, generate possible solutions, identify any roadblocks to solving the problem, and identify the consequences of solutions (Palmer and Wehmeyer). By beginning early, Palmer and Wehmeyer believe young children will be better prepared to become self-determined during their teenage and adult years.

Teaching self-determination to students has been found to be a complicated and challenging task. Initially, many students feel uncomfortable with the process of learning self-determination skills and are resistant to talking about their strengths and weaknesses with others, setting goals and taking responsibility for their learning (Karvonen et al, 2004). One graduate of a self-determination program described his experiences this way:
...It was a huge shock and frustration at first...It is kind of as if you invited a bunch of people over to your house for a party and you invited them all to look in your underwear drawer. Because there are a lot of secrets that are involved there, a lot of things that you don’t want to share...I fought the whole system for the first two years, really tooth and nail. (Karvonen et al., p.36-37)

Karvon en et al. supports my belief that teachers must be patient with students of all ages and persevere with self-determination activities as growth in this area takes time, but can and does happen.

Another significant barrier is the shifting of roles that will need to take place to allow students a more central role in the assessment process. Not only are students often initially uncomfortable with self-determination activities, teachers are also uneasy about stepping back and sharing the power with others and becoming facilitators of learning (Earl, 2003). Earl maintains that by including student, teacher, and even parent input, a resilient mind-set can and will be nurtured.

Lavoie (1997) uses a powerful poker chip analogy to describe how external supports have the potential to reduce and eliminate risk factors and increase protective factors. In his analogy, poker chips are obtained from good things happening, and lost when bad things happen. Meet Joe Cool. He has thousands of poker chips acquired from various accomplishments in school, home, and community. In stark contrast, Larry Learning Disabled’s stack of chips has been eroded away by daily negative experiences, frustrations, and failures. Both of these students are in the same classroom and asked to play poker together. When the cards are dealt, Joe Cool easily takes chances, knowing he has stacks of chips to spare. Larry, afraid of losing even more of his few remaining
chips, clutches his small pile tightly, unwilling to take another risk. Lavoie's point is that external supports, both interpersonal and institutional, will, hopefully, allow students with learning disabilities to end each day with more poker chips than they started with. These supports have the potential to help students with learning disabilities to grow into resilient individuals.

**Summary of the Literature**

Although individuals with learning disabilities have poorer adult outcomes than their non-disabled peers (Bryan, 2003; Murray, 2003; Murray & Wren, 2003), the literature on resiliency is filled with hope and optimism. The paradigm has shifted to more positive and inclusive definitions, practices and models, focussing on relationships and building strengths. Resilience, the capacity to adapt to and rebound from hardships and challenges, is now considered by many not to be a static trait, but rather a complex, dynamic process that can be nurtured and developed over time (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Margalit, 2004). The definitions of learning disabilities has also evolved and have become more optimistic and hopeful in nature by focusing not only on the impairments in one or more areas of processing related to perceiving, thinking, remembering, or learning, but many now also include evidence of hope for growth and learning (LDCA, 2002).

These changing definitions of resilience and learning disabilities reflect the shifting paradigm in special education research and practice from focusing on deficits and problematic areas to a more holistic, comprehensive outlook on persons with learning disabilities, interventions, and the future. This shift has lead to the use of risk and resilience models as researchers are recognizing and attempting to better understand the complex web of risk and protective factors and how they interact to determine the
outcomes for persons with learning disabilities. Figure 1 graphically portrays how these factors interrelate and serves as a model for this present study.

In developing a resilient mind-set, self-determination and social-emotional skills have emerged from the literature as essential internal factors and interpersonal and school support as important external factors. The self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) serves as a framework to guide this study as it attempts to understand why individuals behave the way they do (Bryan & Solomon, 2007). The self-determination theory addresses people’s motivational tendencies and investigates the significance of three psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci).

It has become apparent in the literature that several external factors are able to buffer against the effects of risk factors and also serve as important protective factors. Resilient mind-sets can be nurtured by the role parents, teachers, peers, community members, and schools play. Proactive parents who are involved in their children’s education appear to be able to nurture competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Brooks, 2005; Gonzalez, 2002; Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005; Zhan, 2006). School programs, curriculum, and interventions serve as additional vehicles for promoting and teaching valuable self-determination and social-emotional skills (Elias et al., 2005; Field et al., 2003; Karvonen et al., 2004; Mason et al., 2004). Although it appears the teaching of these skills is a long and difficult task, promising and encouraging results are evident (Karvonen et al.)
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

This study used qualitative data from retrospective interviews with eight university and college students diagnosed with learning disabilities and receiving supports and services related to their disability. This chapter describes the research approach, site and participant selection, description of the participants, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, methodological assumptions, limitations, efforts to establish credibility, and ethical considerations.

Research Methodology and Design

According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005), all qualitative research approaches share two common traits: focusing on phenomenon occurring in natural settings, and studying the phenomenon in all its complexity. Qualitative researchers attempt to see the "real world" by conducting their research in locations where the participants live and work. As this particular study examined resilience factors as perceived by university and college students, it was appropriate for me to meet the students at a location on their campus or another place of their choice where they felt comfortable and where I could observe and interview them in an uncontrived environment.

Qualitative researchers do not try to simplify the phenomenon, but rather recognize that there are many issues and layers involved (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Resilience is a complex and dynamic phenomenon that involves many internal and external factors. These factors include skills, attributes, abilities, and relationships with others that all contribute in various ways to an individual's ability to deal with everyday challenges, adversities, and stress (Brooks, 2005; Margalit, 2004). By embracing
complexity, qualitative research offers a venue well suited to studying the complexity of resilience factors.

Qualitative researchers also recognize the need and importance of listening to the voices of the participants being studied in order to gain new insights about the phenomenon of interest (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Through open-ended questioning, the participants’ stories, thoughts, and opinions are heard. By learning about experiences of the participants from them directly, qualitative data can play a significant and considerable role in improving the lives of the participants (Creswell, 2005).

To explore the personal experiences and perceptions of the participants in this study and gain an “insider’s perspective”, a phenomenological approach was used (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 51). Phenomenology was first introduced by Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the twentieth century, and was developed and refined for approximately the next 50 years (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Broadly defined, “phenomenology refers to a person’s perception of the meaning of an event, as opposed to the events as it exists external to the person (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 139). Using a phenomenological approach, I used lengthy interviews of open-ended questions to address what it is like to live with a learning disability, thus addressing my research questions. Due to my time constraints, it was not possible to collect data over a lengthy period of time spanning several different developmental time periods. By looking at eight different perspectives on the same issues, an interpretation was made about resilience factors as perceived by the participants (Leedy & Ormrod).
Selection of Site and Participants

Prior to beginning my search for potential participants, an Application for Ethical Review of Research Involving Human Participants was submitted to the Brock University Ethics Review Board. After a complete ethical review of the proposal for research, clearance was obtained to commence the study. (See Appendix B.)

To remain consistent with a phenomenological approach, I interviewed participants at the university or college they were attending or at another location of their choosing. Being able to interview them where they studied or liked to relax provided natural settings to collect the data. Purposeful sampling strategies were used to select eight university students all attending postsecondary institutions located in southern Ontario. Homogeneous sampling is a sampling strategy used by researchers to "purposefully sample individuals or sites based on membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics" (Creswell, 2005, p. 206). Homogeneous sampling was appropriate for this study as my participants were postsecondary students who all belonged to a specific subgroup within college or university: the participants all had self-disclosed their learning disability and were open to receiving supports and services related to their disability.

Snowball sampling was the second strategy employed in order to obtain four of the eight participants. This strategy “typically proceeds after a study begins and occurs when the researcher asks participants to recommend other individuals to the study” (Creswell, 2005, p. 206). During the interviews, I asked participants if they knew of any other students with learning disabilities who might be interested in participating in the study.
I chose to interview students who had self-disclosed their learning disability and were open to receiving services and supports related to their disability. This choice was evidence that they had at least some degree of self-determination; these individuals are aware of their weaknesses and struggles and were availing themselves of supports they deemed necessary (Karvonen et al., 2004).

Due to the nature of my study and the challenge of finding potential participants, I decided to make use of a gatekeeper. Creswell (2005) defines a gatekeeper as "an individual who has an official or unofficial role at the site, provides entrance to a site, helps researchers locate people, and assists in the identification of places to study" (p. 209). The manager at one university's disabilities services office was contacted to solicit her help in obtaining potential participants. During a telephone conversation on July 25, 2006, she informed me that her office serves approximately 280 university students with learning disabilities. All are expected to meet one-on-one with a case manager at the office during the beginning of September to review services needed and to receive a packet including a day planner and other relevant information. She was not comfortable sending out a blanket email invitation to potential participants, but did suggest I put together some information regarding my study to be inserted into the packets.

After receiving clearance from the university's Ethics Review Board, I met in person with this manager at the disabilities services office to present her with a Letter of Introduction and approximately 280 flyers to be inserted in the packets for students with learning disabilities. The flyer contained information regarding the purpose of the study and an invitation to contact me or my Faculty Supervisor via phone or email if interested in further information. After receiving no response from potential participants after 2
months, clearance was received from the Ethics Review Board to offer participants $20.00 cash for their participation in this study. New flyers with the revised compensation information were distributed through the disability services office which resulted in some interest in my study. Recruitment was slow, taking over a year using both homogeneous and snowball sampling techniques to obtain an adequate number of participants. Potential participants that contacted me were sent a Letter of Invitation familiarizing them with the purpose, possible implications, and potential benefits and risks of the study. Participants signed a consent form before commencing with interviews.

**Description of Participants**

Table 1 provides a summary description of the participants in this study. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the students involved in this study. The 2 female and 6 male participants' ages ranged between 18 and 38 years old. All 8 participants were attending postsecondary institutions in southern Ontario, but their school situations varied considerably from 1st year students (3 participants) to graduate student (1 participant). Six participants were in school full-time, and 2 students were in school part-time, juggling a career along with their studies. Seven of the 8 participants had at least one disability that co-existed with their learning disability including Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (4 participants), a heart condition (1 participant), a speech disorder (1 participant), paranoid schizophrenia (1 participant), and neurofibromatosis (1 participant). Their interests and fields of study also varied and included mathematics, accounting, sociology, English, education and engineering. Personal and living situations
### Table 1

**Summary of Participant Profiles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Sex/Age</th>
<th>College/University</th>
<th>Major/Program</th>
<th>Full-time/Part-time</th>
<th>Place in Program</th>
<th>Type of Disabilities</th>
<th>Family Life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Darren</td>
<td>M/28</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Mathematics Integrated with Computer Applications</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Returning student 3rd year</td>
<td>-Learning Disability -Paranoid Schizophrenia</td>
<td>Single, living with parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Smit</td>
<td>M/21</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>3rd year</td>
<td>-Learning Disability -Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder</td>
<td>Single, living in university residence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Alexandra</td>
<td>F/18</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>-Learning Disability -Heart condition</td>
<td>Single, living in university residence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Steven</td>
<td>M/28</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>7th year Final year</td>
<td>-Learning Disability</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Sex/ Age</th>
<th>College/ University</th>
<th>Major/ Program</th>
<th>Full-time/ Part-time</th>
<th>Place in Program</th>
<th>Type of Disabilities</th>
<th>Family Life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 5. Thomas             | M/38     | University          | English        | Part-time            | 3rd year         | - Learning Disabilities  
|                       |          |                     |                |                      |                  | - Neurofibromitosis    
|                       |          |                     |                |                      |                  | - Speech Disorder      
|                       |          |                     |                |                      |                  | - Tourette's Syndrome  |
| 6. Joseph             | M/18     | College             | Network Engineering and Security Analysis | Full-time       | 1st year         | - Learning Disability 
|                       |          |                     |                |                      |                  | - Attention Deficit    
|                       |          |                     |                |                      |                  | Hyperactivity Disorder |
| 7. Casey              | F/32     | University          | Master of Education | Part-time       | 6th graduate course | - Learning Disability 
|                       |          |                     |                |                      |                  | - Attention Deficit    
|                       |          |                     |                |                      |                  | Hyperactivity Disorder |
| 8. Eric               | M/18     | University          | Engineering    | Full-time          | 1st year         | - Learning Disability  
|                       |          |                     |                |                      |                  | - Attention Deficit    
|                       |          |                     |                |                      |                  | Disorder             |
ranged from single (7 participants) to married (1 participant) and living with family (3 participants), living alone (1 participant), and living in university residence (5 participants).

**Instrumentation**

As the focus of phenomenological studies is on the lived experiences of individuals, open-ended, in-depth interviews were deemed appropriate (Cornett-Devito & Worley, 2005). Interview guides received clearance from the Brock University Research Ethics Board prior to commencement of the study (See Appendixes C and D). While developing the questions, I gave careful consideration to ensure that they were not anticipated to cause any mental, psychological or social harm.

Open-ended questions were selected to allow participants to voice their experiences free from constraints of my perceptions (Creswell, 2005). Careful planning of the questions was required to formulate ones that would gather information regarding the study's research questions. Table 2 provides a matrix of this study's main research questions in relation to the interview questions. To the right of each research question are codes (i.e., 1.6, 2.2) which refer to specific interview questions. For example, 1.6 refers to the sixth question from the first interview. Ten broad questions were included on the first interview protocol, along with several prompts to use if more depth to the responses was needed. Sample questions include: Describe what it was like growing up with a learning disability. What were some of the biggest barriers or frustrations you experienced in school? What personal qualities and skills do you believe have been important to your success in university/college? During the second interview, each
Table 2

*Research Questions in Relation to Interview Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What are the main barriers and challenges students with learning disabilities perceive they have had to endure?</td>
<td>1.1, 1.3, 1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What coping mechanisms, strategies, and personal qualities have students with learning disabilities employed and drawn upon to overcome barriers and challenges?</td>
<td>1.2, 1.3, 1.7, 1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What conditions have maintained and enhanced the motivational tendencies of university and college students with learning disabilities?</td>
<td>1.2, 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 1.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
participant was asked similar questions as outlined on the interview protocol. Although a guide was used for second interviews, often additional questions during the second interview varied for each participant as the questions evolved after data analysis from the first interview and were designed to clarify and dig deeper into themes that had emerged from the first interviews.

**Data Collection and Recording**

Two forms of qualitative data collection took place: interviews and observations. One-on-one, open-ended interviews were used as the main source of data collection. Each participant was involved in two interviews, the first one lasting approximately 1 hour, and the second one, approximately 30-60 minutes. Before interviews took place, participants were emailed a copy of the interview guide to help them prepare for the interview and signed a Letter of Consent outlining the purpose of the study and their rights as a participant. Interviews took place in office space made available at the university where the students were attending or at another location of their choosing. Unless specifically requested by the participants, the door to the office was closed to allow for privacy and to minimize distractions and interruptions. At the time of the interviews, a brief introduction advised the participants of the study’s purpose and implications, as well as their right to refuse to answer any question they felt was invasive or offensive. Participants were reminded of their right to terminate participation in the study at any time without penalty. It was explained that the interview was being audio recorded to ensure the accuracy of our conversation and that they would be sent a copy of the interview transcript to confirm the accuracy of the data. The recorder was turned on
only after participants were informed and ready to start the interview and turned off immediately after their last response.

To protect the rights and privacy of the participants, they were all assigned a pseudonym that was used on the transcripts. To ensure confidentiality, participants were referred to by their pseudonyms in all discussions and reports pertaining to this study, and all audio tapes and transcripts were labeled using pseudonyms only. My faculty supervisor and I were the only people who had access to the data. A master list of participants and their assigned pseudonyms was stored in a separate and secure location in further efforts to protect their identity.

During data collection, I strove to help the participants feel as comfortable as possible. I began each interview with some small talk in an effort to establish rapport and help the participant feel comfortable and relaxed. The use of open-ended questions provided a format where there were no wrong answers. I tried to refrain from disclosing my own beliefs or perceptions during the interviews and attempted to demonstrate compassion and empathy throughout the interview with my body language and eye contact (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Although the interviews were quite informal, I often referred back to the interview guide to help keep the conversation on track and to make sure that the research questions were being addressed during the interview.

During each of the interviews, I took both descriptive and reflective field notes to provide additional information that could not be captured on the audio recording (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Descriptive field notes were observations made about what was happening during the interview and were often comments regarding the participants' behavior or actions during the interview. Reflective field notes included my reflections
and thoughts regarding the themes emerging, hunches, and personal insights. All field notes were recorded on a copy of the interview guide and were used in addition to the interview transcripts to help identify and explore meaningful themes and contrapuntal voices (Leedy & Ormrod).

At the conclusion of the second interview, participants received $20.00 cash in compensation and a letter of appreciation expressing my gratitude for their participation in this research project. Participants were invited to indicate if they wished to receive a copy of the executive summary available after the completion of the study.

Data Processing and Analysis

The data collection process produced a vast amount of information, which through two distinct processes was eventually organized into meaningful themes and an understanding of the participants' individual experiences: (a) the interpretive phenomenological analysis method as described by Smith and Osborn (2003), and (b) the listening guide method developed by Gilligan et al. (2003). Upon the completion of each interview, I converted the audio tape recordings into text data. This usually took place the day after the interviews, while the conversations were still fresh in my mind. I carefully transcribed each word and also noted lengthy pauses, laughter, interruptions, and inaudible remarks (Creswell, 2005). Following the transcribing process, each transcript and accompanying field notes were examined multiple times following the steps outlined below.

Once a transcription was complete, the text data were perused in an attempt to gain an overall sense of the data as a whole (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). I envisioned this step as using a wide angle lens to scan the data, which was followed by a much more
narrow focus when I began to hand analyze the data. Using a hand analysis approach, "researchers read the data, mark it by hand, and divide it into parts" (Creswell, 2005, p. 234). Analyzing by hand was chosen over computer analysis due to the small database I was working with. As this was my first time analyzing qualitative data, I also wanted a hands-on approach to the data as I hoped it would help with my discussion on the results and possible implications.

During the first phase of data analysis, I followed the steps suggested in the interpretive phenomenological analysis method as described by Smith and Osborn (2003). The first step involved looking for themes in the first case. This was done by reading the script and field notes several times, making anecdotal comments during each reading in the left-hand margin of the transcripts noting responses that were interesting or significant. Although there are no rules about what I needed to comment on, comments were often attempts to summarize or paraphrase the text, to gain an overall sense of the participant, or to make implicit comments more explicit. The second stage of this step was a continuation of the process of looking for themes. During continued readings of the script, the right-hand margin was used to write down emerging themes.

Stage two involved connecting the themes. During this stage, all the themes were listed on a piece of paper, and I began to look for any connections between them and clustered themes together. During this stage, I stayed as close as possible to the actual text in an attempt to stay true to what the participant was saying. I documented the participant's phrases that supported the connected themes. After compiling the themes into a table, I moved through these stages with the other transcripts. I used the themes from the first participant as a guide, but was also careful to acknowledge any new themes
that emerged. Once all the transcripts were analyzed, I compiled all the themes into one table. The final stage involved writing up the results, which proved to be a continuing of the analysis process. Themes were explained and interpreted in a narrative report along with verbatim extracts of the transcripts to support the results.

In an attempt to strengthen the results of this phenomenological study, it was considered valuable to use a second analytical method. The listening guide, a voice-centered method developed by Gilligan et al. (2003), was deemed appropriate as it is an analytical method designed to capture the inner voices of the participants allowing the researcher to become more closely connected to and aware of their internal worlds. Consistent with the goals of phenomenological studies, this method helps give the researcher an insider’s perspective of the phenomenon being studied and is also able to help capture the distinct and multilayered voices of the participants. The listening guide adds depth to this study as it is an approach that “is distinctly different from traditional methods of coding, in that one listens to, rather than categorizes or quantifies the text of the interview” (p. 132, Tolman, 2001 as cited in Gilligan et al.).

Although four steps referred to as listenings are intended to be used together in the listening guide, for this study, these steps were adapted to address the specific needs and research questions of this study. The first step involves reading through the entire transcripts of both interviews with a participant, listening carefully for plot, stories, and themes that emerged from the transcript. The researcher acknowledges her own reactions and responses to the interview and, therefore, becomes an active participant in the listening process. For the purpose of this study, I used this step to reflect on my reactions to the interviews and to specifically listen to how the participants spoke about
them selves, thus setting the stage and helping to identify passages to be used for the second listening: "I poems."

Step two, I poems, was of particular interest to this study as it allows each participant's unique voice to heard, thus more fully honoring and identifying the contributions made by each student. I poems focus on the first person voice of the participants, picking up on the distinct rhythms and tones in the interview transcripts. Additionally, I poems explore how participants speak about themselves, often illuminating a range of themes, emotions and contrapuntal voices. In constructing the I poems, I followed the rules as suggested by Gilligan et al. (2003):

(a) underline or select every first-person "I" within the passage you have chosen along with the verb and any seemingly important accompanying words and (b) maintain the sequence in which these phrases appear in the text. Then pull out the underlined "I" phrases, keeping them in the order they appear in the text, and place each phrase on a separate line, like lines in a poem...Often the I poem itself will seem to fall readily into stanzas—reflecting a shift in meaning or change in voice, the ending of a cadence or the start of a new breath. (pp. 162-163)

I poems were particularly powerful and useful in this study as they were able to capture themes and meanings not evident in the first and more traditional method of analysis. These poems allowed me to capture from a different lens factors university and college students perceive have contributed to their resilience.

Step three, listening for contrapuntal voices, is where the researcher can "begin to identify, specify, and sort out the different strands in the interview that may speak to our research question" (Gilligan et al. 2003, p. 165). Although Gilligan et al. suggest using
the entire transcript for this listening, I chose to use the I poems as the foundation for this step, wanting to listen specifically for the first person contrapuntal voices apparent in the transcripts. In every poem, two contrapuntal voices were identified, each signifying a different layer of the participant's experience as they related to the main research question. These voices were identified with separate colours throughout the entire I poem. The relationship between these two voices, either conflicting or complementary, was investigated.

The fourth and final step involves composing a brief analysis and summary of the listening, specifically highlighting how the information learned relates to the study's main research question. In this study, the analysis focused primarily on steps two and three. Excerpts of each participants' I poems were selected and the contrapuntal voices identified in the I poems were explored and addressed.

Methodological Assumptions

This study was based upon methodological assumptions, which I make explicit in this section. Several major assumptions were made about the participants and about the phenomenon of resilience. It was assumed that all university and college students with learning disabilities have experienced stress, pressure, disappointments, mistakes, trauma, and/or adversities in their life. It was also assumed that postsecondary students with learning disabilities who had self-disclosed their disability and were open to receiving supports and services related to their disability had at least some degree and resiliency and self-determination. Because they had successfully completed high school and had been admitted into university or college, it was assumed that they had overcome challenges and obstacles in life to achieve this level of education.
By self-disclosing their learning disability and availing themselves of support services, the assumption was made that they were somewhat aware of their disability, their strengths and weaknesses, and had some self-advocacy skills. As all participants signed a consent form, it was also assumed that all students willingly participated in the interviews and understood the purpose of the study and their rights as participants. Assumptions about the phenomenon of resilience were also made, and these assumptions were based on the literature as reviewed in Chapter Two. It was assumed that resilience is a dynamic and complex phenomenon that can be nurtured and strengthened over time; many internal and external factors contribute to a resilient mind-set.

**Limitations**

No study or method is perfect, and several limitations of this study have been noted and attempts were made to minimize these limitations throughout the course of the project. A significant limitation was my inexperience in collecting, analyzing, and interpreting qualitative data. With increased experience, a more thorough and comprehensive analysis of the data may have been obtained. To minimize the limitation of my inexperience, much guidance, direction, and advice was offered from the Faculty Supervisor and other committee members. Through their careful questioning and suggestions, I believe a stronger report was realized.

Another significant limitation recognized was the measurement problems inherent in the self-reporting nature of this research study. Participants were asked to comment on and share stories about past events. Relying on the memory of participants may have presented a distorted view of reality as people are prone to remember what they think should or might have happened as opposed to what actually happened (Leedy & Ormrod,
Although a shortcoming, Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) argue that this limitation may not be as significant as it first appears. They suggest that much can be learned by examining what the participants remember about their experiences.

By also interviewing peers, family members, and/or others who know and work with individuals with learning disabilities, a more complete and accurate picture of the factors involved may be obtained (Wong, 2003). For this study, it was not feasible to conduct such follow-up interviews with non-learning disabled individuals, but fieldnotes were also used during the interviews in an attempt to strengthen the data (Creswell, 2005).

Additionally, this study only analyzed a single snapshot in time in the lives of the participants. It would have been more ideal to collect data over a longer period of time, especially across several developmental stages and transition time periods to assess how individuals with learning disabilities respond to the changing adversities and challenges in their lives. By collecting data over time using a risk and resilience framework, much richer results may have been obtained (Murray, 2003). Due to my time constraints, this was not possible. I used retrospective open-ended questions to probe for information regarding earlier time periods in the lives of participants.

In this study I recognized the complexity of resilience and the multitude of variables and factors. Two factors not controlled were the specificity of learning disabilities and the gender of the participants. There are various degrees and types of learning disabilities, and I did not address one specific type or severity in this study. It is recognized that learning disabilities may co-exist with other disabilities and conditions, and this study included students with various additional disabilities. Gender may also
influence the results as initial research on this issue has suggested that male and female students with learning disabilities exhibit differences in social and coping skills (Wong, 2003). Due to the difficulty in obtaining potential participants, I did not limit my sample by imposing further restrictions, and I was able to investigate resilience factors of a diverse group of students with learning disabilities.

Results of this qualitative study will be unable to be repeated or generalized beyond the sample used in the study. The sample size was small, involving only eight students, and results might have been strengthened with more participants. Another limitation was the level of comfort that could be achieved by the participants, thus affecting the quality and depth of their responses. I had limited time together to build rapport and trust. The interview format, though open-ended and allowing for spontaneity, was still unnatural. Participants willingly chose to be part of this study and volunteered to share their story. The presence of an audio recorder and the knowledge that the interview was going to be transcribed and used to develop a thesis project, may have also made the participants feel anxious and uncomfortable. To minimize these limitations, many efforts were made to relax the participants and build up trust through my body language and eye contact. Interview questions were emailed to the participants prior to our meetings, and interviews were started with some small talk to help them feel more prepared and at ease. All interviews were audio recorded and participants were aware that they would be provided an opportunity to read the interview transcript and add, delete, or clarify any points they wished. The tape recorder was started only after participants were told and prepared and then shut off immediately after the participants completed their final response.
Establishing Credibility

Several procedures were employed to ensure that the results of this qualitative study are credible. Although interviews were only conducted with the student participants, corroborating evidence was used from both the interview transcripts and observational and reflective field notes made by the researcher. Additionally, two analytical methods were used to strengthen the conclusions: the interpretive phenomenological analysis method (Smith & Osborn, 2003) and the listening guide method (Gilligan et al., 2003). By drawing on information from two sources and using two analysis methods, the results are more likely to be credible (Creswell, 2005). Other strategies used included audio recording the interviews and member checking. The use of an audio recorder during the interviews ensured that I was able to accurately capture the thoughts and ideas of the participants. I transcribed each of the interviews and provided participants with a chance to read the transcript to check for accuracy of data and to add, delete, or clarify any points that they wished. Participants emailed me feedback regarding their transcripts, and only 1 participant made minor revisions clarifying some of the responses. Additionally, two one-on-one in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant. The first interview lasted approximately 1 hour, and the second interview varied in length from 25-60 minutes. These interviews resulted in thick description, further ensuring the credibility of results.

Ethical Considerations

As I conducted research with human participants, I received clearance from the Brock University Ethics Review Board before commencing with participant selections and data collection. I adhered to Brock University's ethical guidelines to ensure the
participants' rights were protected. There were no anticipated physical, psychological, or social risks greater than those the participants might experience in their daily lives. Interview questions were scrutinized to help ensure that the questions would not cause embarrassment, offense, guilt, or anxiety. Participants could refuse to answer any question they felt was invasive or offensive.

Participants willingly volunteered to participate and all signed a consent form. They were informed both verbally and in writing of their right to withdraw from the study at any point and would experience no negative implications as a result. All data were treated confidentially, and only my faculty supervisor and I had access to the data. The participants were all assigned pseudonyms, and their names were not recorded on the transcripts, audio tapes, or in any written documents regarding the study.

Restatement of the Problem

This study examined resilience factors of individuals with learning disabilities. More specifically, eight university and college students were interviewed. This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach in an attempt to understand the perceptions of students with learning disabilities in regards to what factors they consider to have been significant in their ability to overcome their disabilities and challenges (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The themes and voices that emerged after data analysis are discussed in Chapter Four. These results may contribute to a growing understanding and knowledge of students with learning disabilities and to an ability to provide well grounded and effective intervention and prevention programs for them (Thoma & Getzel, 2005).
CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the results of this research study. In this study, I used qualitative data to examine resilience factors of eight university and college students as revealed through retrospective interviews. Interview questions were formulated to generate in-depth responses to this study's research questions. Data collection produced a substantial amount of information which was analyzed using two distinct methods: (a) the interpretive phenomenological analysis method (Smith & Osborn, 2003) to uncover emerging themes; and (b) an adaptation of the listening guide (Gilligan et al., 2003) to capture the inner world and distinct multilayered voices of the individual participants. In the first part of this chapter, I present the major results of this study as identified using the interpretive phenomenological method. Themes are supported by paraphrases and quotations taken from the interview transcripts and are discussed under four main headings: Challenges and Obstacles, Surviving Challenges, Supportive Conditions, and A Journey of Discovery and Hope. Table 3 illustrates the major findings of this study and identifies supporting codes and sources of data. The second part of this chapter presents the participants' unique contributions to the phenomenon of resilience as revealed through the use of the listening guide method (Gilligan et al.). An excerpt of each participant's I poems and a brief analysis of themes and contrapuntal voices are included in this section.

Challenges and Obstacles

Interviews with the 8 participants in this study revealed a host of challenges and obstacles faced by these students with learning disabilities. Many of the challenges presented themselves during elementary and high school and continued to persist into
Table 3

Matrix of Themes and Sources of Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes and Supporting Codes</th>
<th>Thomas</th>
<th>Steven</th>
<th>Alexandra</th>
<th>Casey</th>
<th>Darren</th>
<th>Smit</th>
<th>Joseph</th>
<th>Eric</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Coping Strategies and Skills</td>
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<th>Alexandra</th>
<th>Casey</th>
<th>Darren</th>
<th>Smit</th>
<th>Joseph</th>
<th>Eric</th>
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<td>Positive Outlets:</td>
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<td><strong>A Journey of Discovery and Hope</strong></td>
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university and college. The participants' challenges and obstacles are organized and presented under the following headings: Academic Difficulties, Lack and Understanding and Support, Social and Behavioral Struggles, and Emotional Burdens.

Academic Difficulties

All of the participants shared stories of academic challenges and difficulties, often spanning from elementary school to university or college. One of the most common challenges presented was difficulty processing written language. Three of the participants spoke of experiencing delays acquiring literacy skills and of lagging behind their peers in this area. Reading deficiencies not only impacted language arts activities, but eventually began to negatively influence performances in other academic areas, even areas perceived as strengths. Smit was frustrated in elementary school by the far reaching implications of his reading delays:

My math started to fail because math like started to come into word problems. So when it was just strict math, I was really good, the best. Better than anybody else in the class. But when we started having word problems, you had to understand the words that are used to tell you...I would just assume this is what they want to know, and just do it without reading the question....My mark started going down.

(Smit)

Smit realized that reading ability was crucial to success in all academic subject areas.

Written expression was found to be extremely challenging for 6 participants. Participants gave various reasons to explain this weakness including slow information processing skills (3 participants), misunderstanding directions (1 participant), inability to multitask well (1 participant), difficulty organizing information logically (3 participants),
and weak fine motor skills (1 participant). Thomas and Smit communicated how their various processing and attention challenges lead to low marks in school, and in Thomas’ case, two failed grades in elementary school. Steven’s weak visual acquisition and memory skills impacted all areas of learning as these challenges made it difficult for him to process information quickly. Eric described his writing difficulties as his chief weakness: “I cannot write...I have the whole idea in my head and how I want to put it out, but as soon as it comes to putting it on paper, I can’t do it...It’s the whole part of putting the ideas into words on paper.” This disconnection between potential and actual output was also evident in other participants’ stories. Steven was especially frustrated that his grades never reflected his true potential. This theme emerged five distinct times during his interviews: “…I managed to survive through high school and did mediocre, but not as well as I would have expected to do...I feel I process at one level, but output at another.” This separation between ability and performance continued to leave Steven feeling insecure about his academic capabilities.

Casey and Alexandra were both diagnosed early and described their academic challenges in more general terms. For example, Casey recalled frequently being removed from her elementary school classes to receive remedial support from her resource teachers. Similarly, Alexandra received extra assistance from the special education department:

I think it was grade 5 or 6, I started to get pulled out because [the challenges] either started to grow or you were doing more complex English and math, right....I was always getting pulled out of the classroom for English and math...So you‘re always getting physically pulled out. (Alexandra)
Both Alexandra and Casey recognized in elementary school that they needed more support than their peers to attain new skills and concepts.

Five of the participants shared stories of academic challenges related to their difficulty staying focused and managing time efficiently. Being easily distracted affected all areas of their education including work at school and home. Darren's disability affected his ability to think clearly and manage time well, and he often struggled with feeling extremely tired due to the effects of his medication. Joseph and Eric have grappled with similar time management issues and relayed stories of late assignments building up in high school due to their inability to stay focused on their school work. Joseph described a typical day as: "I'd sit there staring at the roof and no matter how hard I'd try to listen, I just couldn't do it...I'd spend the whole day sitting there thinking about things, and I wouldn't pay attention." Now in his first year of university, Eric is struggling to adjust to his increased independence and decreased parental involvement. Eric is continuing to wrestle with staying on task and getting assignments completed by their due dates.

Alexandra, Eric, Steven, and Thomas feel they need more time in university to process and understand new information than is typically given in class and it takes them longer than their peers to complete assignments. Early on in their elementary school career, Thomas, Joseph, and Steven recognized that new concepts and skills seemed to come much more naturally to their peers. Thomas remembered a peer in elementary school who missed a lot of class. When his classmate returned to school, Thomas recalled thinking: "...why is my friend who has been away for so, so long, and comes back and is able to pick up right away and I'm here dragging?" Joseph and Eric
struggled with memorizing facts and dates as easily as their peers. Joseph remembered a moment when he became distinctly aware of his learning differences. After struggling at length to memorize a passage from the Bible, his younger brother came in the room and easily rattled it off. Joseph noted “...no matter how long I sat there reading, I couldn’t pick it up.” For Alexandra, this realization of how easily learning comes to average learners became especially apparent in university: “I have a roommate. I was like, how is it that she is doing nothing, but still gets such good grades?” Not only did it appear to these participants that little work was needed, Smit noted that learners without disabilities seem to have little problem sitting still and staying on task for long periods of time.

Lack of Understanding and Support

An obstacle 6 participants reported was feeling misunderstood and unsupported by parents, peers, and/or teachers. Both Smit and Thomas reported not being diagnosed with having learning disabilities until university, blaming their elementary and high school teachers for misunderstanding the root of their poor academic performances. Smit and Thomas recalled teachers attributing their low grades to laziness or wanting attention. After struggling greatly in a Nigerian boarding school, Smit moved to Canada for high school, looking forward to a fresh start. Unfortunately, his teachers in Canada failed to refer him to an educational psychologist and also misunderstood the root of his behavioral and academic struggles. Although more forgiving of his Nigerian teachers due to their circumstances and limited resources, Smit blamed his Canadian teachers for lacking knowledge about learning disabilities and not providing him with appropriate interventions and academic support. He commented: “When I come here, it should be the high school teacher’s responsibility to at least know something. That this guy is
struggling hard, but it's not working for him. Why is that?” Smit resented being misunderstood and unsupported by his teachers.

Although Casey was diagnosed with a learning disability at a very early age, she also felt her teachers misunderstood her and as a result provided ineffective support. She reported:

So literally my elementary school career very early on it was going to the learning resource teacher. And the stupidest thing they could have done is they took a kid like me out of gym where I could have burned off all my energies and frustrations, and they sat me in some bloody class, and you know, for my LAT appointments. What are you thinking? And you went and did your masters? And you don’t know shit. (Casey)

Although Joseph found some of his elementary and high school teachers helpful, he reported others to be unforgiving, inflexible, and unhelpful. Similarly, Eric shared memories of feeling frustrated that he did not receive any extra support or accommodations in school until grade 12 when he was formally diagnosed with a learning disability, even though he reported his teachers knew he was struggling with learning challenges. Interestingly, 6 of the participants recalled how their differences presented as challenges especially during their elementary school years. Joseph explained why his early years were more difficult: “The younger grades were a bit more of a struggle. Like, everyone’s taking the same courses. Everybody is expected to stay on par with each other, that type of stuff. That was a lot more difficult.” According to these participants, elementary school teachers offered fewer opportunities for them to
make their own choices and curriculum expectations were similar for all students which often emphasized areas of weakness.

Although each story was unique, 3 participants described a similar desire to be known and understood as people first, not just as disabled individuals. Darren's situation was distinct from the other participants as he was also been diagnosed with a mental illness. Darren yearned for a greater awareness and understanding of disabilities among the general population, and in particular, an understanding of individuals with schizophrenia. He stated:

I'd love to go, "Would you like to meet a mental patient?"...I sort of wish that I could change the public perception. They think they would go meet the illness, but they would meet me, and see me as a person, and see us with real struggles...In most cases, the perception of mental illness is shaped by popular culture, and let's just say that we don't exactly get the best billing in Hollywood. 

(Darren)

It appeared to Darren that mental illnesses and learning disabilities were often misunderstood and misrepresented in the media, resulting in the general public knowing little accurate information about these disorders or how to support individuals who suffer from them.

Unfortunately, 2 of the participants also revealed feeling unsupported and misunderstood at home. Thomas found it impossible to be involved in extracurricular activities or to nurture other interests because his parents were unwilling and/or unable to drive him to and from events. His parents also failed to provide extra academic support at home, and Thomas often felt he did not have enough time to complete homework after
finishing his assigned chores around the farm. Even in university, Thomas stated: “My mom hasn’t been very much of a support because…she thinks, ‘What are you doing in university? It’s so much stress.’…She goes, ‘Don’t do it’.” Smit recalled similar feelings of being unsupported by his family while growing up, creating a distant relationship with his parents that continued to persist in university. After Smit was diagnosed with a learning disability during his first year in university he reported: “I tried to tell them, but they don’t believe me, so why would I tell them?...I didn’t tell them because I don’t really care what they think.” In an effort to protect him from further misunderstandings, Smit does not quickly disclose his learning disability to his classmates worrying they “may see it as a sign of weakness on [his] part.” Smit wanted to appear intelligent and capable to his professors and peers.

Social and Behavioral Struggles

Enduring social and/or behavioral difficulties were mentioned by 7 participants in this study. Developing and maintaining friendships proved to be particularly difficult for several of the participants. Alexandra reported the least amount of social conflict and attributed the limited number of social confrontations she did have to normal adolescent behavior unrelated to her learning disability. Four of the participants recounted painful experiences of feeling alone, not having many friends, being bullied, and feeling unpopular. Eric described his relationships with classmates as strained:

I was the bullied guy. I was never the popular one…I was never the popular kid. I was never the best at sports. I was an average guy. I’m getting better at some things, but I was always one of the lower picks for teams and stuff. (Eric)
Participants provided various reasons to explain these difficulties, often assigning the blame to their own disabilities and poor social skills. Smit explained: “I made friends fast, but I had problems keeping them...I really need to get attention. I need to do something different. I would do something crazy. Maybe I would bother them too much.” Thomas and Joseph offered similar explanations for their difficulty with making friends. Joseph recalled: “I never really had a lot of friends...I was probably one of the more annoying kids to be around.” Thomas remembered frequently talking to his peers and asking them questions when work was to be done.

Proximity and personal interests proved to be additional barriers to building strong friendships. Both Thomas and Steven lived a considerable distance away from their classmates in elementary and high school making it difficult for them to nurture friendships outside of school time. Darren discovered having exceptional academic competence, “odd” interests, and little athletic ability made it difficult for him to fit in well at school and “was picked on to some extent” because of his unique characteristics.

Although several of the participants reported having better social skills and stronger friendships in university and college, for some social challenges persist. Thomas and Darren both spoke of socializing with females and dating as particularly difficult. Darren described dating as an intimidating process: “…for me it’s especially [difficult], coupled with all the disasters that have approached me...I don’t have a lot of confidence with the whole dating thing.” Several unsuccessful dating experiences have eroded feelings of confidence, making Thomas and Darren hesitant and reluctant to continue their pursuit of romantic relationships.
Three of the participants shared memories of having behavioral issues, especially during their younger years. Casey described herself as a high energy child, very difficult to manage: “Well, I came out, and I bounced off every corner of every wall. And I had behavior issues... Everyone said to my parents, my parents’ friends said, ‘How the hell can you handle this kid?’” She described having full blown temper tantrums and having to work hard to maintain control of herself. Smit recalled struggling through elementary school and teachers often criticizing his restlessness and inappropriate behavior: “It was bad. I just remember them complaining, serious complaints. I was always getting into trouble... I was the class clown all my life.” Upon reflecting on his elementary school years, Steven downplayed his behavioral struggles by commenting: “I’m sure I acted out a little bit, especially grades 2 through 6. I was kicked out of class once in a while.” Steven attributed his behavioral problems to underlying feelings of frustration related to his disability, and more specifically to his inability to achieve the grades he felt he should have been capable of receiving.

*Emotional Burdens*

Participants spoke of emotional burdens that further compounded and added to the adversities faced. The emotions described were either reflections of innate personality traits or reactions provoked by the challenges endured. The prevailing emotional burdens described by the participants included *feelings of frustration* and *wanting to escape/feeling trapped*. Seven of the participants described *feeling frustrated*, many of them repeating this theme several times during the interviews while recalling what it was like to grow up with a learning disability. Frustrations stemmed from feeling different (6 participants), not being able to complete tasks as quickly as their peers (3
participants), not being able to stay focused on their school work (2 participants), not doing as well as expected (2 participants), and not having many friends (1 participant.) A common theme amongst the transcripts was the frustration of feeling different than their peers and/or siblings. School was often perceived by the participants as being more demanding for them than for the average learner. Even before being officially diagnosed, 2 of the participants relayed stories of feeling atypical. For example, Thomas always "knew that something wasn’t right there" although he was not diagnosed with a learning disability until his mid-30s. After receiving his diagnosis in elementary school, Joseph acknowledged at first being disappointed with the diagnosis and having to go on medication to treat his Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. His disappointment stemmed from the pain of being atypical and of simply wanting to be normal.

Because new skills and concepts were more difficult to attain, participants often felt they had to work much harder and put more time and effort into their work than the average learner. Smit alleged he has to “…try harder than every other kid to get almost the same marks as them.” Darren’s disability at times leaves him feeling alone, “frustrated and emotionally very frayed.” These feelings are exacerbated by the invisibility of Darren’s learning disabilities, as he explained: “…I’m the only one who’s experiencing it. No one can see it.” Additional emotions reported by 4 participants that are closely connected to feelings of frustration were feeling overwhelmed, stressed, fearful, and angry.

Another dominant emotional burden identified by 5 participants was wanting to escape/feeling trapped. Being at school and, in particular, the classroom proved to be very draining and left 6 participants wanting to escape. Casey described growing up with
a learning disability as "beyond brutal" and "horrific." She reported: "I hated school. I hated school with a passion... The best thing about elementary school was when I got to leave every day because it was hell. It was prison. It was hell. Hell. Awful."

Interestingly, Casey and Smit depicted their experiences in the younger grades with similar images as Smit also found his elementary school experiences to be oppressive: "It was just like jail." When asked about his favourite parts of a typical elementary school day, Steven revealed he looked forward to going home. Alexandra remembered that she liked opportunities "to get away from the classroom environment," and Thomas recalled wanting "any excuse to leave the classroom during the day." Eric described feeling so distraught about being bullied and having a learning disability that he experienced an intense desire to escape his adversities: "I did hit a spell of depression because of it... I tried to commit suicide in grade 4. Not many people know that." Although counseling proved to help Eric's depression, he still wanted to attend high school in another city, desiring to get away from his elementary school peers. Eric's parents convinced him that a new school was not the answer, assuring him relationships would improve during high school. In the years following Darren's mental illness diagnosis, he also struggled with depression and feelings of wanting to escape. He had difficulty at times finding reasons to continue living.

**Surviving Challenges**

Despite enduring numerous and often chronic challenges, all of the participants expressed a desire to overcome their adversities. Some spoke of coming to a distinct moment of deciding to take control of their lives, and all participants described a process over time of assuming greater responsibility for decision making and goal setting. In an
attempt to deal with their situations and carry on, the participants of this study revealed drawing upon various personal resources and a range of coping strategies. This section outlines how the participants survived their challenges by describing the following subthemes that emerged from the data: Making Decisions and Goals, Coping Strategies and Skills, Diet and Medication, and Personal Qualities.

*Making Decisions and Goals*

Participants spoke passionately about the importance of making personal decisions and goals. Interestingly, 3 of the participants articulated two possible results they saw for themselves: a successful, healthy outcome or an unsuccessful, unhealthy outcome. Smit recognized in high school that he was heading down an undesirable path and consciously decided to “turn a new leaf.” He said: “You can end up in jail, you can end up being a bum, you can end up getting yourself in trouble every time, or you can actually sit up and just try to do this.” Recognizing he was on course to end up in jail or on the streets, Smit started to make decisions and set goals that helped him gain entrance into university. Without these goals, Smit alleged, “it’s just going to work.” Joseph, also not wanting to be overcome by his disabilities, noted: “...eventually you just learn that you either have to do something about it or it’s just going to keep going like that...You have to learn to live through it.” Joseph decided to make positive changes in his life and learned ways to live with and overcome his hurdles.

Casey and Smit were motivated to change their life courses after comparing themselves with their friends and analyzing the choices they saw their peers make. After graduating from college, Casey found herself unexpectedly working at a greenhouse. She
was motivated to set her own goals after recognizing her own discontentment and comparing her life to that of her friends:

So I hated the greenhouse with a passion... I felt absolutely demoralized. At that time all my friends were in university and their dreams were coming true, and I was going piss-all nowhere... So then I started thinking about, thinking about, thinking about it, and I decided I'm going to try university... I didn't want to be left behind. (Casey)

This decision to go to university dramatically and positively changed the course of Casey's life.

In high school, Smit noted he was unimpressed by those he knew who lacked goals for their futures. He stated: "I looked at people around me, and they were still in the same place, and I just didn't want to be like that." Smit decided to make positive changes in his life.

In order to be successful, several participants spoke about the importance of beginning with yourself and knowing what you want in life. In addressing how she is able to overcome her adversities, Alexandra exclaimed: "It's up to your own will, I guess. You have to want do it... it's always up to the individual to figure out what they ultimately want." When these goals come from within, success is more likely. Casey attributed success in the latter stages of her educational career to taking ownership of her goals. She stated: "It wasn't anyone else's goal. It was for me. I did it because I wanted to." This was liberating for Casey, especially after feeling as a child that her teachers took away her decision making power:
They're making all the decisions and that's not fun about being a little kid. Now that I'm an adult, I make my own decisions... So basically, if you can survive your childhood, get out of it as soon as you can and be an adult. (Casey)

Darren and Smit agreed with these sentiments and the importance of knowing and setting personal goals. Darren recognized that the recipe for success will not look the same for everyone:

I'd have to say that any strategy for overcoming a disability has to begin with the person who has it... They have to figure out what works for them... There is no one size fits all... You have to go [to university] with some sort of plan. (Darren)

Although university and college are demanding and challenging for the participants, they persevere due to their long term goals. Thomas and Smit want a degree that will enable them to earn a higher income. The goal of becoming a teacher motivates Alexandra to continue with her studies. Joseph set a future goal of working in computer networking and, therefore, chose his college program accordingly. Darren, living with paranoid schizophrenia, simply wants his life back: "I want to be a person again... That to me is my driving force." These long term goals are just that, long term. Two of the participants described how they break these large goals into smaller, more manageable and attainable short-term goals and move ahead one step at a time.

Coping Strategies and Skills

Participants employed a variety of strategies in an attempt to endure and adapt to difficult circumstances. Although recognizing some strategies were not the most effective or ethical ways to cope with their problems, many of the participants continue to draw on these methods in university or college in an effort to carry on and protect
themselves from additional hurt and failure. Procrastination and avoidance were tactics commonly utilized by the participants. Alexandra remembered dropping out of ballet class because of fear of failure:

And I think as a kid, I didn’t challenge myself enough like I do today... As a kid, I was afraid of that. I think I thought I don’t want to do ballet because it’s going to be so [hard]. And the same thing with piano. Same thing with band.

(Alexandra)

Worrying the risks were too great, Alexandra discontinued lessons in an attempt to avoid possible disappointment and embarrassment. Although Thomas now regrets his decision, he avoided taking advanced courses in high school fearing they would be too difficult and instead opted for level one courses and "took the easy way out." Eric and Joseph continue to use procrastination as a means to avoid doing challenging and/or uninteresting school work. Joseph admitted: "I would find other things to do to avoid doing the stuff I should be doing" which often resulted in a build-up of overdue homework assignments. Eric continues to procrastinate on assignments causing him to receive lower marks in university because of incomplete and late work.

Steven and Thomas both recalled cheating in school in order to successfully complete their work. Thomas shared struggling to grasp new concepts in elementary school math classes and reported copying answers from the teacher’s answer key on more than one occasion. Steven has found getting his ideas organized and written down to be extremely difficult tasks, but managed to get by in elementary and high school by turning in his mother’s work:
My mother always helped me at home with English related stuff. She would significantly edit things. To be honest, she did more than she should have in several areas. She wrote speeches for me in grade school... actually wrote them... Even later on in high school, she would do more than edit essays, not essays, but several writing assignments. (Steven)

In hindsight, Steven now regrets his mother doing so much for him as he realizes as a result he failed to develop better independent writing skills.

Three participants described how they coped with elementary and high school teachers presenting material too fast, making it difficult for them to understand concepts and/or keep up with school work. Thomas feigned understanding and not readily admitted confusion, and Smit pretended he was listening and understanding lessons by nodding his head and looking directly at the teacher. Now in university, Eric continues to make excuses to his professors and himself to cope with his difficulty completing homework on time:

Like I missed an assignment this week that I have probably run out of time to get an extension on it, but it was because of the choir. It wasn’t this weekend, it was last weekend. I had choir, and I was going to say I had used that as a quote unquote excuse to get a little bit more time on it, but I was really busy this week and wasn’t able to send an email out to the professor... (Eric)

After repeated failures in elementary school, Smit reported he endured his challenges by using more drastic tactics:
There was a stage when I just didn’t care...I just gave up. I pretty much gave up. I just didn’t care. I just did enough to pass. Just to pass with the lowest average to get promoted to the next grade. I just gave up. (Smit)

Although Alexandra did not report “giving up,” she does feel that by not caring too much she is able to cope with difficult circumstances and disappointments.

Over time, more mature and helpful coping strategies and skills were developed by the participants. The most common strategies employed included: reducing distractions, setting limits, employing good study habits, and asking questions. Being aware of personal strengths and weaknesses proved to be valuable in the development of strategies that effectively minimized the effects of limitations and capitalized on strengths. Several of the participants spoke of struggling to stay focused and on task for long periods of time and shared ways they now reduce distractions. Thomas finds living alone curbs distractions, and Smit, recognizing that he feels very restless in the evening, wakes up at 8:00 every morning to do his work before classes begin. Darren, Smit, and Eric all attempt to stay focused by carefully managing their time to prevent the build-up of assignments and becoming overwhelmed. Thomas and Darren reported often working ahead on assignments helps ensure homework will be completed on time.

Participants also revealed reducing the effects of their challenges by limiting and controlling the amount and type of work they chose to do. Joseph, knowing he learns best by experience, chose a college program that is interesting and hands-on which he feels is helping him stay focused and motivated to do his work. Although lengthening his university stay, Steven knows his limits and took reduced course loads each semester. Steven chose courses with more oral components and fewer writing assignments: “I had
an expectation about how much I could write in terms of how many papers I could manage per semester...I just made sure I wouldn’t be required to write too many.” Alexandra and Steven had difficulty keeping up with note taking in class and, therefore, chose to focus their energies on listening and paying attention during lectures.

Participants found employing good study skills and habits effectively improved their grades in university and college. Because Joseph and Thomas recognized their success in school depends largely on class attendance and completing all homework assignments, these have become priorities for them. Smit struggled with reading and comprehension and, therefore, used learning objectives listed in his textbooks to focus his reading and check for understanding. Thomas found it helpful to rewrite his notes after class and use mnemonics as a memory aid. Alexandra utilized graphic organizers to help her see connections between concepts. Several participants spoke about the benefits of recording lectures to refer to later.

Even with the use of good strategies, participants spoke of struggling to keep up with the pace in university and grasping new concepts. Although recognizing how hard it is to ask for help, several participants revealed the importance of not being afraid to seek assistance when needed and to keep asking questions until they are satisfactorily answered. Even though Eric’s ego at times gets in the way, he was beginning to follow his own advice more often:

Don’t hesitate to ask for help. Go to your teachers and ask how they can help you with something. If even it means helping you by minimizing some of the work load...or even just helping you with some stuff you don’t understand...Most schools have the resource department you can go to get help, extra help with
studying, or tutors or whatever they can provide you with...It's just asking for help in general. (Eric)

Four of the participants believed they improved their academic performance by asking for help and studying with classmates and friends.

*Diet and Medication*

Five of the participants described how their medication or modified diet has helped manage the disabilities that co-exist with their learning disabilities. According to 4 of the participants, medication has successfully enabled them to cope with their disabilities. Darren has been on medication to control the effects of his mental illness, and without the aid of drugs, he recognized his view of reality would be considerably distorted. Although frustrated that his medication has side effects, including making him very tired, the benefits far outweigh any negative consequences. Joseph, Eric, and Smit have all been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and acknowledged that although medication alters their personality, it dramatically improves their grades and classroom behavior by increasing their ability to regulate their behavior. When on medication, these students noticed a marked improvement in their ability to focus their attention, listen, concentrate, and sit still. After his diagnosis in university, Smit tried to manage his disabilities without medication, and experienced some limited success. Smit noticed a significant difference after going on medication and is now much less frustrated in school and proud of his academic success. Despite revealing how painful it is to know he needs drugs to get by, he strongly recommended other students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder go on medication.
When just a young child, Casey’s doctors recommended she be put on medication to control her behavior problems. After only 1 day on medication, Casey’s parents decided a more natural approach, one that would not turn their daughter into a “zombie,” was preferable. Casey reported her family chose to encourage daily physical activity and completely changed their eating habits to help manage her behavior. Casey’s parents limited her sugar intake and eliminated all dyes, MSG, white bread, and bubble gum from her diet. Casey maintained this approach effectively improved her behavior without the negative side effects of medication.

**Personal Qualities**

Participants identified several internal qualities that they believed have been instrumental in overcoming their challenges. Although many of these qualities were perceived to be innate characteristics participants were born with, participants also shared how experiences, other people and time have all helped nurture and develop these qualities. The dominant personality traits and resources that emerged from the data include: *determination, persistence, and intelligence.*

* Determination emerged as a significant and important theme amongst several of the participants. Participants spoke of the importance of completing their school work with a purpose and goal in mind. During my first interview with Casey, when asked what qualities she considers to have been most significant in overcoming her adversities, her response was immediate: “My strength, my drive, my determination. I’ll get it done, and I’ll go through life. Sometimes it won’t be pretty, but I’ll get it done.” Smit was also adamant that his determination was the most important factor as he stated: “You have to be determined or it’s not going to work.” Thomas’ determination has enabled him to
persevere through school, even without the support and encouragement of his parents. In contrast, Steven attributed his supportive and influential family and church community with nurturing his determination:

There was a certain sort of determination that I've had to be successful and maybe that's where some of the family dynamics and church community and values that I internalized. I just don't give up on things until they're done, especially on school assignments. (Steven)

Participants shared stories of how their determination allowed them to continue working through their challenges, never giving up. Determination to overcome challenges has resulted in all of the participants being able to meet goals and overcome difficult circumstances in their lives. Thomas has found particular satisfaction in doing things for himself, his way: “All my life, I'm the youngest, I've been told what you have to do, what you have to say, and I just want to start doing my own thing.” Alexandra, Casey, and Darren recalled receiving awards that they worked hard for and were determined to win. Darren described his award winning moment as an extremely positive experience:

I think my greatest pride was when I actually went to the Canada wide science fair in grade 8...I won the local one for my age. Basically I did a project called “The Stepping Stones to the Stars” in which I argued that the international space station...we should build it as a platform for solar system exploration and eventually to the stars...That to me was a source of enormous pride. I went there and got an honorable mention for it. (Darren)

Because of their determination, Thomas, Casey, Darren, Joseph, and Smit shared stories of working hard to achieve good marks in university/college. Smit described the effort it
takes: "I would say it's just determination and continuous trying, not just giving up. It's so easy for you to give up, but it's just continuous trying." Similarly, Thomas remarked:

Just for me, I feel like I have to work harder than the average person, so working a lot harder is the key, and doing things right away. Do not procrastinate because regardless if you wait for tomorrow or the next day, the thing has to get done. That essay won't write itself, so you've got to start right on your research. And try, just keep on trying. (Thomas)

Thomas' determination, self-control, and good organizational skills enable him to successfully complete his university course work on time.

As these previous quotes by Smit and Thomas suggest, determination is closely related to persistence, or the ability to continue on in the face of problems and adversities. Despite their challenges and at times repeated failures, several participants told of being able to persist and bounce back. Although Alexandra at times still feels likes giving up, she knows she has to continue on:

Yah, so just never give up, and just remember that your ultimate goal is your happiness. I hate saying that too because I need immediate results, but it's not going to come immediate to you. You've got to work for it. My mom said that...the harder the journey, the more worthwhile it's going to be. And that's always stuck with me...Why can't life be easy? But life is not like that, you know. You really have to push through. (Alexandra)

Steven also described of pushing through adversity and gave an example of taking a university Philosophy course two times because he failed it the first time. Interestingly though, he did not focus on the failure in our interview, but rather on the success and joy
he experienced by successfully completing the course the second time. Casey’s life story is also ripe with disappointments and setbacks, yet, she, too, remained positive and told how she was able to rebound from obstacles, set new goals, and successfully carry on. Alexandra’s bubbly and positive outlook on life was immediately evident upon meeting her. She told of not getting overly upset with her mistakes, but rather focused on the future and moving ahead. Alexandra believed by not caring too much about the things that do not go well, and by focusing on her strengths, she is able to stay positive and continue improving. For 4 participants, their ability to persist through adversities is due in part to their ability to solve problems and generate multiple possible solutions to dilemmas. By sticking with difficult situations and not giving up easily, these 4 participants felt solutions are produced which enable them to get around their roadblocks.

Being able to persist and rebound from challenges may stem from the participants’ ability to take ownership for their decisions and mistakes instead of blaming others. During our first interview, Casey admitted she did not complete an assignment due earlier in the week. Instead of blaming others, Casey displayed confidence by taking ownership for her failure. Despite an exceptionally busy week at work, Casey readily admitted having poor time management. Although Eric still uses excuses to cope with his challenges, he also ultimately holds himself responsible for his actions and build-up of overdue assignments in high school: “I should have always gotten it in sooner.”

Intelligence was a theme identified by 6 participants in this study. They recognized that their success is due in part to their innate intellectual capacities. Participants spoke of enjoying learning new things and expanding their skills, knowledge, and minds. Darren described himself as “gifted,” “extremely intelligent” and a
“divergent thinker” which he believes gives him an edge over other learners. Similarly, Steven attributed his success to his intellect: “I think that it...was because my intelligence was very high that I was able to manage.” Alexandra views herself as smart, but not academically inclined: “I'm more experience inclined. I like to analyze things, like people, movies. I like to watch people’s behaviors.” Her keen observations have enabled Alexandra to develop good social skills and strong friendships. Joseph believes his success in college is due in part to the natural abilities and gifts he has understanding and working with computers.

Supportive Conditions

Participants’ internal qualities and skills are only part of their stories. All described external conditions that have supported and enabled them to continue conquering their adversities. Several supportive conditions emerged as dominant themes including: positive outlets, emotional support, involved parents, and school support. Although these themes have been divided under these headings, there is some overlap between these conditions and personal qualities as these factors influence each other and the boundaries between them are at times difficult to distinguish.

Positive Outlets

Positive outlets, providing opportunities to nurture positive feelings, build skills and provide an escape from the challenges and adversities endured by the students proved to be important elements in developing resiliency in the participants of this study. These outlets enabled the participants to focus less on areas of weaknesses and to nurture strengths. Thomas recommended: “never mind about what your weakness is, focus on what your strength is and, uh, build upon that.” Thomas believes this focus on his
positive attributes is a key to his resiliency. The dominant positive outlets that emerged from the data include: academic islands of competence, sports and physical activity, and community involvement. Other outlets mentioned, but not prevailing themes, included: watching television (2 participants), role playing and imaginative games with friends (2 participants), and making up stories (1 participant).

_Academic islands of competence._ Although all 8 participants described experiencing varying degrees and types of academic challenges, 5 also enjoyed pockets of academic success. Participants shared stories of excelling in one or more of the following areas: mathematics, science, computer programming, and singing. The participants' islands of academic competence generated feelings of confidence and optimism and provided sources of enjoyment. Steven described his positive experiences competing in math competitions in elementary and high school:

I was a top student in a grade 7 competition, and I was the top in my high school class for 4 of the 5 years I was in high school... No one else was interested in spending extra time doing math problems, but I enjoyed that and the challenge. The challenge certainly invigorated me, and I think it helped me feel optimistic about my academic potential because I was doing well, really well at something, better than my peers at something, so I could sort of keep up with other things.

(Steven)

Eric, Joseph, and Darren also found it extremely validating and encouraging having skills and knowledge in areas that exceeded those of their peers.

Despite enjoying years of prior competence in mathematics, Darren described his feelings of doubt and insecurity upon returning to university after a 6-year break due to
his mental illness. These undesirable feelings diminished after receiving the highest
mark in the class on a mathematics midterm:

And at that point I started feeling, okay, I do belong here. I can do it...I do have a
future here...It was a very positive reinforcing feeling. It allowed me a lot more
confidence in dealing with other students....I felt better about myself...It really
made me proud of myself. (Darren)

This positive experience had the added benefit of building Darren’s confidence in his
social skills. He felt he was a valuable member of the class and became more confident
and comfortable socializing in his classes. Success in specific subjects also boosted
Eric’s social confidence and his willingness to reach out and assist others with studying.

*Sports and physical activity.* When recalling positive experiences, 7 of the 8
participants described involvement in sports and physical activities. Participants recalled
playing outdoors, going for walks, biking, jumping on trampolines, skating, and joining
organized team sports including soccer, ball hockey, volleyball, badminton, T-ball,
ringette, and basketball. Steven considered sports to be one positive outlet that
significantly contributed to his overall well-being between the ages of 8 and 18: “My
mother would say, and I would say this too, that my countenance or demeanor changed
when I wasn’t playing a sport.” Although Thomas did not have the opportunity to play
on any organized sports teams, he enjoyed biking at home after school and appreciated
teachers who incorporated physical and hands-on activities into their lessons noting with
appreciation that: “it gave us a break from the reality of bookwork.”

Although Joseph was on soccer, baseball, and ball hockey teams, he found biking
to be a particularly important outlet:
I enjoyed biking...It’s not like soccer where it’s always fast paced, and you always have to be moving. I mean, if you just feel like getting your energy out, you can hop on your bike and do 30 kilometres an hour down that trail for 10, 20 minutes and then turn back and that’s it, or you can take it on a nice slow pace. You’re free. You can go wherever you want....It was a good freedom, I’d say.

(Joseph)

Biking lacked the restrictions found in many other areas of Joseph’s life and provided him with feelings of freedom and independence.

Eric, who also participated in a variety of sporting activities both in and out of school, found involvement in sports to be one of the most important factors contributing to his healthy development. Without sports in his life, Eric muses:

I probably would’ve turned to other things. I don’t know. Because I’ve had all these sports, I don’t know if that’s been helpful. I’ve stayed away from drugs and drinking...Just because I was able to keep myself busy, not just with school work.

Yah, that’s the point. That’s basically what kept me going. (Eric)

Not only does Eric continue to enjoy playing sports at university and finds they alleviate the stress of school for a bit, he has also learned important social skills and basic teamwork.

When just a young child, Casey’s doctors recommended she be put on medication to treat her Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and control her difficult behavior. Casey fully supports her parents’ decision to deal with her issues without the use of medication and instead chose to get her involved in sports and regular physical activity as
one means of managing her behavior. For Casey, physical activity successfully helped improve her behavior.

Community involvement. For 6 of the participants, holding down part-time jobs and/or being involved in the life of their church provided additional positive outlets. Employment opportunities allowed several of the participants to nurture their gifts and areas of competence. Both Darren and Joseph are skilled working with computers and ran their own computer repair businesses, providing them not only with a small income, but also a sense of satisfaction and enjoyment. Casey and Steven held various jobs since they were young children and appreciated the opportunities for personal growth their jobs provided them. Steven invested much time working on the family farm and store and also helped run a business with his brothers selling pumpkins. He described his work experiences as constructive and helpful: “I think it was a place where I could receive a certain positive feedback about myself, about what I could accomplish.” Similarly, Smit discovered selling shoes part-time to be a positive experience as it was something he described as being gifted at. Involvement in church life offered further positive outlets for three of the participants. Steven commented that being part of his church youth group provided him with a place of support. For Eric, he continues to nurture his passion for music by playing drums in his church band.

Emotional Support

Emotional support emerged as a supportive condition amongst all the participants. The significance of understanding and acceptance surfaced as a theme for all 8 participants. Although only mentioned briefly by 1 participant, the other 7 spoke more extensively about the importance of feeling understood and accepted by others. Two of
the participants felt understood by their fathers who exhibited characteristics and challenges similar to their own. Having a parent with a disability helped make Steven’s difficulties feel more normal, and Joseph found it inspirational and helpful to see how his dad effectively managed the challenges of his own disability. Joseph described being encouraged by his father’s ability to develop good coping strategies:

...he sort of spent a lot of time thinking about it and was able to develop his own coping skills...He spend a lot of his life developing coping skills, and he would sort of tell me. He would show me how they worked and would encourage me that way...It was sort of the fact that he kept putting those ideas in my head and I’d try them out the odd time. And I sort of began to realize that there are ways of coping with it. (Joseph)

Growing up, Steven and Joseph felt their fathers could empathize with their difficulties, but did not dwell on them. Rather, both of their fathers focused on living life, relationships with others, and nurturing strengths in themselves and their children.

Casey, Alexandra, and Darren also described understanding and accepting parents. Alexandra reported her parents at times understanding her better than she even understood herself. Alexandra felt unconditional love and acceptance from her parents, even though she could never achieve the same high grades as her older sister: “I know they love me for who I am, so why do I need to get those As and stuff?” Despite Casey’s difficult behavior and academic challenges as a young child, she felt her parents were optimistic and hopeful about her future and accepted and treasured her unique gifts. Darren also had high praise for his supportive and understanding parents, but noted his
father was especially perceptive and observant: “My father in particular really does understand me, not only what I’m doing, but also who I am.”

Participants also noted the acceptance and understanding they received from friends and siblings. Steven and Smit revealed having siblings who have learning disabilities that present similar challenges to their own. Steven talked about the strain and effort both he and his brother have experienced over the years due to their learning disabilities: “His sort of struggle with it, I’ve experienced the same sort of struggle.” Although Darren’s brother does not have a disability, they have an exceptionally close bond and relationship as twins, helping them more fully understand and accept each other.

Casey fondly recalled a family friend who was one of the few adults in her life who gave her the impression that he had confidence in her and loved her for just who she was. In addition to this one adult friend, Casey described the significant impact two life long friends have had on her life. Although she was not an “A” student like these girl friends, she appreciated their acceptance. Casey recalled playing sports, traveling, partying, and socializing with these girls who continue to support and encourage her to this day. Smit recognized being understood and accepted by his peers was necessary for his survival at his boarding school. Smit reported that often it took fights and struggles with peers before they began to accept and befriend him and understand that he is “a special person to deal with.” For Alexandra, simply being able to share her story with me and feel like I understood and accepted her was motivating. Following is an excerpt of a letter she emailed me following the second interview:
Tracy, I wish we could meet again because I’d give you a HUGE HUG!!!!!!!!
I’m so happy I found this research! THANKS A LOT!!!!!!!! I don’t know how else to express how I feel for this research! But wow! I feel so refreshed and ready to work whenever I read these interviews. Maybe you can add, I get motivated by just simply talking about my life and what I’ve gone through because I can see people care. It really inspired me to carry on and just keep trucking through. THANKS AGAIN SO MUCH!!!!! (Alexandra)
Alexandra enjoyed participating in this study and offered to meet with me a third time.
Simply feeling heard, cared for, and being able to reflect on her own story helped Alexandra to feel understood and motivated her to continue on with her studies.

Darren’s need to be accepted by his friends was also considered critical to his survival and ability to cope with challenging circumstances:

Even this year I’ve made some really great friendships and strengthened others.
People who want to hang out with you and see you as a person, that’s a real boost.
That cannot be understated for anyone with a disability...When I do have people who want to socialize with me, who like me, who think I’m funny, that is enormous. That keeps me going, keeps me wanting to live which is a key component, at least for me. (Darren)
Feeling accepted and liked by peers helped boost his confidence and provided him with motivation to continue fighting to overcome adversities.

Although several of the participants reported feeling misunderstood during their elementary and high school years, Casey, Darren, and Smit all spoke specifically about their positive experiences with understanding and supportive staff at university. Casey
has found her experiences as a graduate student to be extremely rewarding and enjoyable in large part due to the relationship she established with one professor whom she depicted as a “kindred spirit.” Casey described this professor as one of the few teachers she has had who really understands her and the struggle that school has been and continues to be for her:

…the guy is so cool, and he gets it. He just gets it. He gets that education is really tough for some people, and he gets that really the education system is set up for a really small percentage of society who can actually do well in that type of forum. (Casey)

Smit described the Student Development Centre as one of the few places he can go where he is accepted and understood:

They really help you a lot cuz they’re the only people you can go to that know you’re not lazy, and they know you actually have a problem. And they come through for you. You can tell them exactly how things are bugging you and they understand. (Smit)

Similarly, Thomas and Darren feel that the staff at the Student Development Centre understand their unique disabilities and accept them as students.

Emotional support in the form of encouragement was mentioned by 6 of the participants. Encouragement was viewed as being effective in helping them carry on, believe in their abilities to overcome challenges, and set personal goals. Encouragement is a broad theme and was described in a variety of forms ranging from motivating comments to more persuasive pressures, including verbal comments, expectations, rewards, and negative consequences. Although participants noted all these forms were
helpful, they recognized that they have to believe in themselves and ultimately become responsible for making their own choices and decisions.

While sharing their stories, Thomas, Casey, and Alexandra recalled some of the surprisingly simple comments that were effective and had a powerful impact on their lives: "You’ll be fine." "You can handle it." "You’re doing great...Just keep going." "Just stick with it." "You’re doing it." "You’re going to be fine." "You’ve come a long way. Most people don’t get to where you are." "Good for you, girl." These comments came from concerned and caring parents, siblings, teachers, and friends who genuinely believed in the participants’ ability to be successful. Smit revealed: "When people believe in you that makes you feel like you can actually do this. It actually works."

Four participants described encouragement in the form of parental pressure and expectations. Joseph found it encouraging to receive rewards for achieving goals. Joseph recalled receiving a compact disc burner from his parents in middle school after managing to maintain an agreed upon grade average. Expectations from parents to go on to college or university were strong motivating and encouraging factors. This expectation along with not wanting to disappoint their parents created pressure on the participants, but was not perceived negatively. Steven described expectations placed upon him:

There was always the expectation that I would go to university... My grandfather always made sure that all his children went to university, my mother’s father. That expectation was always there, and it never seemed unreasonable because I never did that poorly in school. (Steven)

Smit’s parents are highly educated, and despite his poor academic performances, there was frequent pressure from his parents to do well in school. Upon reflection, Smit
recommended that parents of children with disabilities put pressure on their children and offer rewards if goals are accomplished.

The encouragement Smit received growing up reflects, in part, the cultural disparity he experienced growing up in Nigeria. Smit found great differences between acceptable forms of discipline and pressure in Nigeria and Canada:

...here in Canada, when you hit kids you go to jail for that. But in Nigeria, they hit you, and it’s fine...So like in that kind of situation, when your parents say you have to, you felt that kind of pressure because otherwise they were going to hit you when you get home if you don’t pass, and this kind of thing. It just forces you to be persistent. I just got by pretty much. (Smit)

Smit described his dad encouraging him to do better in school by driving around their hometown, looking at both expensive places like their own and severely impoverished areas. Smit recalled his dad asking him where he wanted to live. Smit felt these types of parental pressures and scare tactics helped him decide what he wanted for his life and gave him the jolt he needed to do enough to pass his courses. Although these parental encouragements helped motivate him, Smit recognized that the real difference occurred in his performance and attitude when he moved to Canada and he decided that he wanted a fresh start: “...in Nigeria I was getting 50s in my classes for my parents because my parents pressured me...after we moved here, I was like, ‘Oh, I gotta do this.’ I just had to because it was the only way out.” This reflects the findings reported previously in this chapter regarding the significance of making personal decisions and taking ownership of goals.
Families provided emotional support for the participants by loving and physically caring for them. Darren felt unconditional love from his family and described having a close and supportive relationship with his brother. In the midst of a low point in Darren’s mental illness, his brother asked him to be in his wedding party:

He didn’t care whether or not I just stood there in the corner because I would go into near catatonic states sometimes. He didn’t care. He’s my brother and he loves me so much. He wanted me in the best man spot...He had done a good job taking care of me and helping me. (Darren)

Darren described the close emotional connection he shares with his entire family. Darren’s parents demonstrate love, patience, and concern for him by physically caring for him in their home, making him laugh, and simply asking him how he is doing. Casey also enjoys living with her parents and credits much of her success to the role they have played in her life: “If I didn’t have my parents, I’d be screwed.” Casey considers her parents to be her best friends and enjoys spending time with them whether it be traveling or simply talking about life and politics. Alexandra finds phone calls with her parents to be emotionally supportive and encouraging:

I had a little mini breakdown last night actually. Sunday nights are always tough because I was with my grandmother, and my grandfather just recently passed away in September...It hit me on this weekend. So even with that, with having family close is a great thing. My parents have talked to me for hours...

(Alexandra)

This quote by Alexandra also highlights the significant role extended family members have played in her emotional well-being.
Involved Parents

Six participants spoke highly of the support they have received from their families, several of them revealing close emotional bonds and attachments to their parents and siblings. As already highlighted in the findings, several of the participants appreciated the acceptance, understanding, and encouragement they received from their families. Through the interviews, it was evident that parents provided significant support by being actively involved in the lives of their children. By being involved, parents were able to promote academic success and become effective advocates for the participants.

Parents promoted academic success by helping to facilitate the learning of new skills and completion of homework assignments. At a young age, Casey’s academic skills were delayed, and she recalled with amazement the amount of patience and effort her mom expended to help:

...she worked and worked and worked beyond measure with me to get me to read, to understand the colours, to understand speech....And I’m sure looking back now, if I were her, I might want to rip my hair out, you know. There were sometimes when it was not easy, and they never gave up. (Casey)

Eric’s parents were also involved in his education, helping him set aside time to complete homework, checking up on him to see if he needed assistance, and limiting distractions to help keep him on task. Steven and Joseph recalled their parents helping to organize and edit essays, effectively helping to compensate for weaknesses and attempting to teach academic skills.

Three of the participants described how their parents actively advocated for them, vigorously campaigning for appropriate supports and interventions. Joseph’s parents met
with school teachers to help set goals and discuss social and academic progress. Without Eric's dad advocating for him, Eric feared he would have never been accepted into university: "...he's been pulling a lot of strings over the years to get things working out because of my disability which has been a great help. Without him, chances are I might not be here." Darren felt indebted to his parents for the role they have played advocating for him:

My family is a rock solid foundation for me...It is to my eternal shame that I lucked out. I know some really great people and they stood by me in the dark. You could not ask for anymore. These people, I want to emulate. Far too many people who have my illness don't have families. They come from broken families. They are on the streets in Toronto. They have no advocates. They have no one to speak for them when they can not speak for themselves. And I had it all. I will say this: I am so lucky and so grateful. They are very wonderful people. I think that they have been enormously key to my recovery and strength for me. (Darren)

Recognizing the dismal outcomes for many individuals with severe mental illnesses, Darren felt fortunate to have the involvement and support of many people in his life, and, in particular, his family.

Although Alexandra and Eric live in university residence, they described the continued involvement of their parents and the importance of being able to maintain a close relationship through regular phone calls and visits. Eric described his dad as someone who has been supportive and involved in all areas of his life including sports, school, and music. His dad visits him at university and helps to make him feel connected
to the family through regular phone calls and care packages. Similarly, Alexandra appreciated the continued involvement her parents have in her life, their wisdom, and the confidence and love she feels from them. Alexandra and Thomas stressed that involved parents should not solve every problem for their children, but rather let kids make mistakes and learn that life will not be easy.

**School Support**

Due to the various barriers and adversities that all 8 participants faced, school often proved to be a difficult endeavor for the participants, and, yet, all 8 have enjoyed successful experiences in university or college. Participants described how supportive teachers and school staff, academic accommodations, and/or the use of technology have been helpful in managing and overcoming their challenges.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, several participants felt unsupported and misunderstood by their elementary and high school teachers and only 3 participants were able to recall a few positive and supportive teachers in their early school years. In contrast, all 8 participants described several positive experiences and interactions they have had with professors and/or support staff at their college or university. Several participants described being impressed with personable, accessible, and caring professors, making students immediately feel comfortable and at ease. Thomas described one professor he found particularly helpful: "...in the 5 minutes I was there, his body language was so laid back, eh, like he wore jeans and a regular shirt and would walk into the lecture like he was one of us." Darren commented on the significance of approachable and caring professors at university:
My professors in all my courses made me feel like I was a person and not just a number in their class. They talked to me and asked me what I wanted to do...The professors made efforts to try and help all of their students...I would like to think that the profs that I knew would have tried hard to make me feel like a person and comfortable. They were approachable and tried to make it not so intimidating environment. (Darren)

Joseph recalled one professor who knew his name before the course even started. This seemingly small gesture on the part of the professor helped build a trusting and open relationship between the professor and his students and encouraged Joseph to disclose his learning disability.

Thomas, Smit, Eric, Darren, and Joseph all spoke highly of the support received at the disabilities services offices, attributing this support to their ability to attend and remain in university. Smit commented: “Without the student development centre, I would have gotten kicked out by now.” Smit is successfully completing his third year at university and is now excelling in his courses. Seven of the participants felt the support services offered to students with learning disabilities has been significant in helping them obtain the modifications, skills, and technological support needed. Facilitating extra time for tests and exams emerged as one of the most helpful accommodations provided. Participants believe this extra time enables them to obtain higher grades and alleviates some of the time pressure they feel during tests and exams. Although none of the participants take advantage of all the services and accommodations available to them, several spoke positively about knowing they can obtain note takers, access tutoring, learn study skills, and receive extensions on due dates for assignments if necessary.
The support of technology emerged as a theme amongst 6 of the participants. Support staff helped several of the participants obtain computers and software to support their learning and compensate for reading and/or writing difficulties. Support staff also provided training and technological assistance to the participants. Smit reported using his computer to help him read text, greatly increasing the speed with which he was able to decipher and understand written material. For Thomas, the benefit of being allowed to write tests and exams on the computer is viewed as a gift as he reported his handwriting is not very legible. To compensate for their difficulty keeping up with the pace in class, 3 of the participants reported digitally recording lectures, giving them the opportunity to listen to the material again if necessary. Eric described how he uses his digital recorder:

For my math courses I do [record] because they to through so much. So if I miss something, I can go back. What I do, as I’m going through, I’ll skip ahead a little and leave myself a note about the time where it was so I can go back to that time.

Or, if it’s a key thing about that section, I use it. (Eric)

The digital recorder allows Eric to listen again to significant parts of class lectures, allowing him to relax more in class.

A Journey of Discovery and Hope

A continuing journey of discovery and hope emerged as a prevailing theme during the interviews amongst all the participants. Reflecting on their life stories, participants described growth in self-acceptance, a shifting from thinking of themselves to a desire to care for and help others, and an increasing optimistic view of themselves and their futures.
Self-Acceptance

For many of the participants, it has taken years to understand and accept themselves and their disabilities. As mentioned earlier in the findings, some of the participants struggled with feeling atypical due to their academic and/or social challenges. As difficult as this has been for them, 7 participants reported an increased self-understanding, feeling at peace with themselves, and openly disclosing their disabilities. Joseph explained why he has no problem revealing and talking about his disability:

I know that there are studies that have been conducted that show that people with learning disabilities, they’re not dumber than anyone else. It doesn’t affect their intellectual capacity at all. It’s [pause] they have to learn differently than other people, but it doesn’t mean they can’t learn as much or more than other people. So you’re not at a disadvantage that way...I guess the reason I’m so open with it is because I’ve become okay with it and don’t consider myself in a negative way any different than everybody else. (Joseph)

Since a young girl, Alexandra has been comfortable with who she is and the limitations of her disability. Her self-acceptance has been instrumental in enabling her to seek the help she has required: “I guess through asking questions I was able to comprehend it. Just be myself. I was just being who I was.” She openly revealed her struggles and was not embarrassed by her disability.

Although Smit is the only participant who keeps his disability relatively private, he does embrace his differences and lively personality. Smit described regularly finding himself in trouble throughout elementary and high school due to his restlessness and
inability to focus. Although now recognizing he needs medication to be successful in the classroom, he chooses not to take medication on the weekend because he likes his real personality and celebrates that he is not a “regular” or “boring” person. Similarly, Casey recognized that she did not “fit the mold” as a child, but now appreciates her unique qualities that make her interesting and “the life of the party.”

Darren conveyed that despite at times wishing for normalcy, he has enjoyed being different and having distinctive gifts and interests: “I’ve always celebrated my differences and embraced that I know I don’t walk the same path as everyone else. I’ve embraced it and always embraced it although I’ve always had this longing to have a normal life.” Steven revealed that self-acceptance is a critical component in building resilient individuals. Recognizing that many limitations and struggles will be life long, Steven recommended that students with learning disabilities focus on their strengths and abilities: “I would say, try and focus on life and the things that you can do well. Get yourself to a place where you make peace with your learning disability and limitations it places on you.” Steven believes he is at peace with his learning disabilities.

Self-acceptance has been nurtured by a sense of pride and satisfaction amongst the participants. The participants are proud of their academic and/or social competence, their islands of competence, and the personal improvements that have been evident over the years. Seven participants are proud of their accomplishments in university/college and of the grades their efforts are being rewarded with. Due to their disabilities and sometimes additional barriers, participants shared how others did not expect them to achieve academic success. Casey, Alexandra, Darren, Smit, and Thomas all shared feelings of pride by proving the negative predictions of others wrong.
Shift in Perspective

For several of the participants, there has been a distinct shift in how they view others, themselves, and their role in the world in around them. With age, participants shared how a better perspective and understanding of priorities has developed. Thomas recognized that this shifting perspective is a process:

I guess as you age, I know I don’t worry as much as I used to, but I still have that fear...And realizing that there are other things important versus worrying about like if you’re wearing the proper clothes or how your hair looks that day. Putting more emphasis on what’s important rather then the things that aren’t. (Thomas)

Although the youngest participant in this study, Joseph is already beginning to put things into perspective and he recommended that others focus on the good things in life and count their blessings. He realized that there are many other people, including friends of his, who have far more challenging difficulties to deal with than he does: “And I sort of realize that my problems are not as big as you sort of make them, and everybody has their own stuff to deal with, and you just have to learn to live through it.” Casey revealed similar feelings as she realized that her rocky times pale in comparison to what others have endured. Although not all people with challenges have been diagnosed with a disability, Alexandra and Eric both commented that everyone has their own hurdles to overcome. Alexandra explained:

Grade 12 really helped me out to start thinking that we are all in the same boat, like regardless if you have a disability or not. Everyone has their weaknesses, it’s just that they’re not identified...We all have our flaws and weaknesses.

(Alexandra)
This recognition changed Alexandra’s perspective on how she viewed herself and those around her.

Although all participants have their own struggles and have received assistance from others over the years, it was interesting to observe and discover through analysis of the transcripts that all the participants had a desire to help and care for others. Through observational data, it was evident the participants wanted to help me with my research study, all of them giving up their valuable time to meet with me on two separate occasions. They all appeared to enjoy participating in this study and sharing their stories with me, knowing that their time and contributions were helpful to me.

Six of the participants described taking pleasure in helping others and several shared stories and examples of assisting friends and family members. For those participants with academic islands of competence, helping their peers study was encouraging, enjoyable, and boosted their confidence. Smit was pleased to be able to help out a fellow university classmate, one whom he considered to be very bright: “I could do the work, right, and I could help. Sometimes he needed help too, and I could explain it...He had a 90 something average, and I was teaching him how to do something.” Eric enjoyed opportunities to help his high school peers study for tests and exams.

Participants explained their desire to help others was motivated by concern and love for their friends and family members. Helping is a way to give back and empathize with other people’s struggles. Alexandra wanted to become a teacher because she feels like she can help other students who are in the same position as she is in. Eric knew the value of having someone there to listen, so he tried to make himself available to others.
who also may be going through a hard time. He felt that his experiences have nurtured his ability to understand and care for others:

That's the one thing I'm good at. I can listen. Because I've been through a lot, I've been able to help others. Because of struggling with friends and homework, I've been able to identify with other people who are struggling with the same things. Give them helpful hints or stuff like that if I can. Otherwise I just try and listen. (Eric)

Both Casey and Darren spoke at length about close connections to their immediate family and their desire to care for and help out their siblings and parents. Casey and Darren recognized the enormous sacrifices family members have made over the years to help them through particularly challenging times, and they appreciated opportunities to give back to their loved ones. Casey willingly assists her physically disabled mother, helping her with daily living needs. Darren considered his ability to give back to his family a defining part of who he is as a person and a central component in his life: “I believe in doing right to the people I care about.”

Hope

An encouraging finding that emerged from all the transcripts was the theme of hope and optimism. Participants revealed how supports at school have improved over the years, family and friends have become more understanding, and personal skills and qualities have developed and grown over time. Although the participants recognized their disabilities are lifelong and will continue to present challenges, they are confident in their ability to carry on and that things are going to work out and continue to improve. Steven revealed that his outlook on life makes a great impact on his life, and he tries to
maintain a positive attitude: “There is this sort of inevitability that whatever happens will work itself out for good.” Alexandra has a similar optimistic outlook on her life and recommends other students with disabilities remain hopeful:

Students need to have hope and believe in themselves...Always remember in the end it will all work out. I know that it is so hard for students to believe in and sometimes I don’t, but it’s true...Because at the end of the day I know I’m still alive, surrounded by people I love and one day it will all make sense and it will all be good in the end. No one said life is easy. (Alexandra)

Darren emphasized the importance of hope and the crucial role it plays in the lives of individuals with learning disabilities. According to Darren, hope is needed to motivate individuals with learning disabilities to carry on, and it should be everyone’s job to nurture and foster hope. Darren summarized his thoughts at the end of our second interview on what he considers to be essential for encouraging resiliency:

Hope is the key. I think it is. As I said, every little strategy I have is about reinforcing hope and keeping the hope alive and to not let the frustration extinguish that. If I don’t believe on some level that I can do university, then there’s not a point for me to go back. As I said, little things that people can do, that everyone can and does do, help keep that positive mind-frame, keep that final goal of just simply wanting to be a person and wanting to have a life. That to me is the goal, whether you’re a friend, a colleague, or parent, or even yourself. That is what you should be striving for. (Darren)
It seems that hope is what all the participants are striving for. All 8 demonstrated some degree of optimism about the accomplishments they have made so far and 4 verbalized their hope for the future.

Listening to Participants’ Voices

During the second phase of data analysis, an adaptation of the listening guide method (Gilligan et al., 2003) was used. This additional approach provided a new perspective to the phenomenon of resilience and strengthened the themes that emerged through the interpretive phenomenological analysis method. The listening guide honoured the participants’ distinct voices and contributions and encouraged a return to the individual stories enabling their inner worlds to be captured. The listening guide method leads the researcher through a series of steps including listening for plot, constructing 1 poems, identifying contrapuntal voices, and composing an analysis. An excerpt of each student’s 1 poem and a brief analysis is included below.

The following 1 poems highlight the unique contributions of each of the participants and the individual stories represented in this study. These poems reveal various contrapuntal inner voices, adding further depth to the exploration of resilience factors as perceived by university and college students. By focusing on the first person voices of the participants, it was possible to explore how these students speak about themselves. Reflections and analysis of the 1 poems revealed a range of themes, emotions, and contrapuntal voices. For Alexandra, her positive voices complimented each other and reflected her determination, optimism, and carefree approach to life. For several of the other participants, contrapuntal voices were in conflict with each other, at times on opposite ends of the same index. For example, Steven’s voice of knowing was
contrasted by a voice of questioning. It is possible that through these contradictions participants were able to learn more about themselves, accept their limitations and differences, set and achieve their goals, and nurture closer relationships with others. The voices associated with pain and adversity often assisted in the development of stronger, more positive and productive voices to compensate for and alleviate the negative impacts of challenges and hurdles. Voices of questioning, longing, despair, sadness and regret, loneliness and frustration demonstrate the adversity and anguish faced by 7 of the participants. The participants' resiliency and ability to cope with their difficult circumstances are signified and demonstrated by the contrasting voices of knowing, confidence, optimism, hope, caring, pride, determination, and acceptance. A summary of participants' voices is presented in Table 4.

Steven

I managed to survive
I think
I just developed
I was in university
I think
I expected myself
I feel
I process at one level
I knew
I was above average intelligence
I did have a problem
I would say
I thought
I applied
I'm not sure
I don't think
I was as frustrated
I didn't know
I'm not sure
I understand the frustration
I did okay
Table 4.

Summary of Participants’ Voices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Contrapuntal Voice #1</th>
<th>Contrapuntal Voice #2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>Voice of knowing</td>
<td>Voice of questioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>Voice of confidence</td>
<td>Voice of longing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darren</td>
<td>Voice of despair</td>
<td>Voice of hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smit</td>
<td>Voice of optimism and hope</td>
<td>Voice of sadness and regret</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casey</td>
<td>Voice of fear</td>
<td>Voice of pride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>Voice of loneliness</td>
<td>Caring for others voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexandra</td>
<td>Carefree voice</td>
<td>Voice of determination and pride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>Voice of frustration</td>
<td>Voice of acceptance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As I went through university
I became dependent
I still wonder
I still have questions

I was always sort of getting by
I think
I think
I avoid it
I usually took four classes
I tended to avoid
I would
I mean
I don’t know
I just sort of knew
I had a limit

I’ve become more aware
I have a learning disability
I worry less
I invest more
I do better

I would say
I get to points
I feel overwhelmed
I don’t want
I’m saying
I know
I don’t know
But I sometimes wonder

I’m going
I’m not sure
If I’ll get there or not

I think
I was thinking
I think
I think
I think
I was
I think
I focused on it more
I’ve left
I think
I’ve just started thinking
I think
I’ll understand
I think
I’m not sure
I’m not sure
I think

Through multiple listenings of Steven’s transcripts and I statements, two distinct contrapuntal voices became apparent: *a voice of knowing* and *a voice of questioning*. Steven’s voice of knowing seems to demonstrate his maturity and deep level of self-awareness. He was clearly a reflective thinker and has spent time contemplating his life, his gifts and abilities, and frustrations and weaknesses. He was aware of and able to articulate the personal qualities that have contributed to his resilience, including his “above average intelligence.” He was conscious of his learning challenges and differences, and he has become increasingly aware of his limitations and struggles. This self-awareness may have enabled Steven to employ good coping strategies such as choosing his courses carefully in order to limit the amount of written output required each semester. He also worried less about trying to overcome his weaknesses, instead choosing to emphasize and capitalize on areas of strength.

There is also a *voice of questioning* evident in Steven’s I poem. During his reflections and responses to questions, Steven often paused to ask further questions. In the above I poem, this voice is supported by the phrases “I don’t know”, “I’m not sure,” “I still wonder,” “I still have questions,” and “I’m not sure if I’ll get there or not.” Steven’s confidence appears to be insecure as he questioned his capabilities and the source of his frustrations and successes. At university, Steven has struggled with the increased academic demands which have been exacerbated by reduced practical
homework support from his parents. He was the only participant who has found university to be more challenging than high school. Steven has become more dependent upon academic accommodations and supports at university, but felt uncomfortable and uneasy about his increased need for them. He questioned what the impact of these academic accommodations will have on his future ability to be successful in the real world when these kinds of supports and special exceptions will no longer be available.

During the interviews, I was initially surprised by the contradictory voices expressed by Steven. At many times, Steven's responses conveyed feelings of confidence and knowing, only to be quickly followed by feelings of uncertainty and confusion. Although his two contrapuntal voices of knowing and questioning appear to be conflicting, the relationship between these two voices may be crucial to Steven's resilience. It is possible that questioning and wondering have enabled Steven to gain deeper insights and understandings. His questioning allows him to continue growing in self-understanding, self-awareness, and self-acceptance, all significant self-determination skills contributing to his overall wellbeing and ability to rebound from adversity. His voice of questioning does not seem to overwhelm or overpower his voice of knowing, but rather compliments it and allows his voice of knowing to continue growing in strength.

Thomas
I spoke more
I'm about to say
I shouldn't after all
I guess
I knew
I don't worry as much
I used to
I still have that fear
I guess
I always wanted to be
I think
If I really want to
I could
I want a higher income
I want to
I don't want
I want to make more money
I guess
I want something besides my name
I think
I'm a personal support worker
I'm at the bottom
I want to attend

I can handle it
I do have a learning disability
I talked
I'm a perfectionist
I handed it in
I'm not the least bit satisfied
I know
I have
I'm a perfectionist
I'm a hard worker

I'm thinking
I can't quite pinpoint it
I've never gone with the flow
I just
I don't know
I'll be thinking
I'll be thinking
I know
I have to do this to prove to myself
I'm able to do it
I guess
I've always had to work very hard
I've never had A marks
I attain
I guess
I guess
I don't know
I want to prove the world wrong
I guess
I'm not a robot
I want to
I don't have to do it
I don't want to go there
I want to do my own thing

For many of the participants, their learning disabilities are invisible to the general public, but for Thomas, his challenges and differences are more apparent. In addition to having learning disabilities, Thomas has tourette’s syndrome and a speech disorder causing him to stutter. Growing up, Thomas described difficulties related to his stuttering and repeated failures at school including two failed grades in elementary school due to poor academic performances. Despite his past challenges, a voice of confidence is evident in his I poem. Thomas has become more confident in his university classes, stating that he participates with increased frequency during discussions and worries less about what others think. Surprisingly, Thomas now considers his ability to verbally express himself as one of his strengths, and he does not allow his stuttering to prevent him from expressing his thoughts and questions. This confidence has apparently matured over time and as Thomas has aged. He has become more aware of his goals and now knows how to access the support and help he requires to be successful. Although acknowledging that at times he still worries about failing and continues to need to work on controlling his speech disorder, his fears are overshadowed by his confidence: “If I really want to, I could” and “I can handle it.” He is not a robot, has “never gone with flow” and is proud to be distinct and to be able to do his own thing and make his own decisions.

A second and more pressing voice heard in his I poem is a voice of longing. Thomas is 38 years old, and has an intense yearning for a change in his life. This longing
voice is evident in the multiple times he repeats "I want..." He is currently working as a personal support worker and dreads the idea of remaining in his current profession until he retires. After learning that he could receive support from the university for his learning disabilities, Thomas has embraced the hope that his goal for a career change may be realized. He stated: "I want a higher income." "I want to make more money." "I want to have something besides my name." "I want to attend." He appeared grateful for the support of the student disabilities office recognizing that his attendance and success in university would be nearly impossible without the accommodations, training, and support they offer. After many years of feeling like a failure, he also longed to prove others wrong and demonstrate to himself, his family, and co-workers that he can be successful in university. This longing for a better future and self-fulfillment drives Thomas to achieve his goals, and he was already beginning to prove that he is able to successfully pass university courses and has valuable contributions to make in class.

Thomas' voice of confidence compliments and is in harmony with his voice of longing, and together they seem to be enabling him to grow in determination and resilience. These inner voices have been nurtured by past experiences and also longings for the future. He has decided he wants a change, has set goals for himself, and has implemented a plan to achieve his aspirations. Although Thomas' parents have not encouraged him in his education while growing up or now in university, Thomas has been able to successfully draw upon the support of his sister, co-workers, and, especially, the staff at his university. These supportive conditions along with his drive and confidence to succeed are enabling him to realize his dreams.
**Darren**

I was diagnosed
I had probably suffered
I had
Yes, yes I did
I became extremely untrusting
I eventually realized
I got close to rock bottom
I could not do school work
I sort of started to figure out
I was
I was behaving oddly
I don’t think
I didn’t see them
I was in school
I’d come home
I’m lucid
I’m behaving oddly
I decided
I just sort of quit

I was diagnosed
I’ve been on medication
I’d like
I don’t mean to

I was diagnosed
I was
I was so medicated
I would get up
All I could do
I had
I wasn’t much of a person
I wasn’t even there

I was getting better
I was getting up
I was getting up
I really tried
I didn’t consider a first step
I had to start

I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to meet Darren as his story had a profound impact on my life. As his I poem suggests, Darren has suffered extreme
adversity in his life due to the sudden onset of a mental illness early on in his university career. His story moved me to tears as I transcribed his interviews and reflected on the anguish and pain Darren’s mental illness has caused for him and his entire family. He revealed how his “slow descent into madness” manifested initially with odd and untrusting behaviors and progressed into a psychotic and near catatonic state. A voice of despair is especially evident in the passage used to formulate this I poem. During our second interview, Darren openly described the difficult years leading up to and following his diagnosis. Examples of this voice of despair include: “I got close to rock bottom.” “I just sort of quit.” “I wasn’t much of a person.” “I wasn’t even there.” Darren spent years passing much of his day sleeping, often wrestling with finding a will to continue living. He repeats the line, “I was diagnosed” multiple times in his I poem, possibly signifying the relief and also the turning point in his life this diagnosis has been for him. This will be a diagnosis he bears and will live with for the rest of his life.

Thankfully, with the support and unending love from his family, and Darren’s desire to take back his life, Darren was able to slowly crawl out of the deep, dark prison of his mental illness. Amazingly, a voice of hope is evident throughout his interviews and in the last stanza of his I poem. His journey of learning to live with and manage a mental illness has been a long one, starting slowly with simply the ability and desire to get out of bed a little earlier each day. Darren’s longing to feel like a person again has driven him to continue fighting for his life. Setbacks in his illness have emphasized the need to take small steps forward, setting manageable and attainable goals along the way. Darren hoped and dreamed of the day he would graduate from university and live independently. He celebrated the small successes he has already achieved and was proud
of his ability to attend and excel in university. Despite all the years that Darren felt he has lost, he was not bitter or resentful, choosing instead to focus on the positive things in his life and his hope for the future. Although Darren still battles with his voice of despair, it now seems to be a less dominant voice which is being replaced by an overriding voice of hope. This voice of hope continues to be nurtured by his family and close friends and demonstrates his resiliency and ability to rebound from extreme adversity.

_Smit_

I study
I study
When I study
I'll be fine
I studied
I got 90
I studied
I never studied

I can look around
I want to
I want to
I just read

I was the class clown all my life
I now know why
I was doing that
I knew
I realize
I needed that
I just needed that
I went on medication
I actually knew
I was kinda of happy
I didn't want to be the class clown again
I didn't want to be the guy

I was the other time
I kinda liked myself
I had so much energy
I was so much energy
I was lively

I have to
I'm taking
I would have to stay on medication
I would have to
I would have to
I think
I think
I'll have to disclose
I'm ADD

Smit’s I poem, formulated from one continuous passage from the second interview transcript, highlights a range of actions and emotions. The first stanza stresses the enormous amount of work Smit has invested into his school work, using the past and present tense of the verb study six times. He felt he has to work much harder than the average learner, maybe even harder than anyone else in his class. A voice of optimism and hope is also evident as he reported, “I’ll be fine...I got 90.” Smit appears proud of his high marks, self-aware of his need to be on medication, and relieved to have control over his behavior and ability to attend. He was tired of being the class clown, of being the student all his teachers knew and complained about.

These are all relatively new developments and improvements in Smit’s life as he did not receive his diagnosis until his first year in university. Now in his third year, he reported the most positive experience for him at university has been receiving his diagnosis, coming as a tremendous relief to him that his difficulties and feelings of being different were not due to his laziness, lack of desire, or low intelligence. After his diagnosis, Smit was able to obtain the support and medication needed to turn his dismal start to university around, and he was now enjoying academic success and a university degree now seems possible. Without his diagnosis and subsequent support for the student
development centre, Smit believed he would have been expelled from university long ago.

Although the recent changes in his life due to his diagnosis have been extremely positive and rewarding, there is also a voice of sadness and regret evident in his I poem. When on medication, Smit missed his real personality and his zest for life. Although it is his choice to be on medication, he felt he really had no choice. Without medication, he recognized he would be unable to stay focused and achieve the grades he needed to survive and be successful in university. It was painful knowing that he needed drugs to manage his disability. Interestingly, Smit is the only participant who does not openly reveal his disability to others, but he reluctantly acknowledged in this poem that at times he needs to disclose in order to get by and be understood by others. This journey of self-acceptance and understanding seems to be far from over for Smit.

Casey

I’ve got to do something
I’m 22, 23
I’ve got to do something
I didn’t want to be left behind
I thought
I’m going to be left behind
I thought
I’ve got too much going for me
I’m nothing
I’ve got a lot to offer

So I decided
I’m going to university
I enrolled
I didn’t have the grades
I saved my money
I flew
I flew
I kicked butt
I decided
I think I learned I was very determined I felt I was there

I was immediately drawn to Casey upon meeting her. Casey is blessed with an outgoing, fun-loving personality and an ability to make others laugh and feel at ease. First impressions of Casey included a confident, strong young woman who knows what she wants and how to get it. She appeared to be bold and courageous and not afraid to speak her mind, try new things, go on adventures, or take risks. She also has a kind and sensitive side, speaking often of the positive relationships she has with her immediate family and girl friends. Her desire to protect and support the ones she loves along with her passion to teach and connect with her students was clearly evident.

After spending more time with Casey, and listening to her transcripts and I poem, I was surprised to hear a voice of fear interspersed throughout her story. Evident in the first stanza of her I poem, Casey struggles with a quiet, yet, persistent, inner voice of fear. She stated: “I’ve got to do something…I didn’t want to be left behind…I’m going to be left behind…I’m nothing.” Years of failure and adversity have left a lasting scar on Casey that manifests itself in self-doubt and insecurity. She feared being trapped in an unrewarding and unfulfilling job while her friends were all living their dreams. Her voice of fear could have prevented her from setting goals for herself and realizing her own dreams. Her inner battle raged on: “I’m nothing…I’ve got a lot to offer.” During our second interview, Casey shared a story of her reluctance and fear to get blood work done, evidence that Casey’s voice of fear persists. Casey’s fears, insecurities, and self-doubts continue to emerge and affect her daily life.
Despite her adversities, Casey’s voice of fear seems to be increasingly less dominant and prevalent. Since her mid-20s, Casey has been able to successfully set and achieve various academic, professional, and personal goals. She has far exceeded the expectations of others and now enjoys teaching at a community college and is working on completing her graduate studies. A voice of pride is evident in the second stanza of her I poem where she described of deciding to go to university. She was proud of getting accepted into university, of being able to pay for her education, and of being successful in her courses. Once she made the decision to go back to school, she was determined to succeed, and did. She stated: “I flew… I flew… I kicked butt.”

Casey’s tough and confident exterior perhaps shields and protects her from many insecurities and fears. Casey recognized the lasting effects of multiple negative experiences while growing up, and she continued to lack trust in teachers, medical professionals, and even sometimes herself. Thankfully, Casey did have the support and acceptance of her family and a few close friends throughout the years enabling her to transform from a little girl filled with fear and anger into a proud, confident and competent woman.

Eric

I never enjoyed
I didn’t enjoy
I cannot write
I can
I want to
I can’t do it
I’ve even had it checked out

I strongly like the physical education
I’ve been playing soccer
I’ve been staying with it
I still play soccer
I’ve moved on
I’ve been able to

I’d sit there
I usually made it through
I did
I struggled with to pass
I passed
I wasn’t working at my full
I wasn’t showing my complete capability
I was
I often helped
I didn’t always hand my labs in
I would hand my stuff in

I was the bullied guy
I was never really the popular one
I did hit a spell of depression
I tried to commit suicide
I was so depressed
I was never the popular kid
I was never the best at sports
I was an average guy
I was always one of the lower picks
I have a few close friends
I was never
I would
I never got to do that

I’m friends
I can listen
I’m good at
I can listen
I’ve been through a lot
I’ve been able to help others
I’ve been able to
I can
I just try and listen
I know
I never
I was counseled
I know the value
I try and make myself available
The tone and mood of Eric's I poem varies greatly between the stanzas reflecting the variety of Eric's experiences and reactions. When describing school experiences, both academic and social, there is a heaviness and at times sadness in his tone. Eric has endured intense academic struggles throughout elementary and high school, not receiving a diagnosis identifying his learning disabilities until grade 12. In the first stanza, he identifies written expression as one of his most frustrating challenges. Not only does Eric wrestle with communicating his ideas on paper, he has always struggled with staying on task as he is easily distracted. Despite these hurdles, Eric managed to survive and pass his courses. When describing his relationships with close friends and his involvement in sports and music, his tone changed dramatically. Eric spoke enthusiastically and passionately about the positive impact they have had on his life.

Eric's I poem highlights some of his foundational experiences and character traits. Contrasting contrapuntal voices are heard throughout his I poem as Eric moves between positive and negative past and present experiences: a voice of loneliness and a caring for others voice. Growing up, Eric's social difficulties had a profound impact on his life. During his elementary school years, Eric struggled with fitting in and developing close relationships with his peers. He stated: "I was the bullied guy...I was never really the popular one...I was an average guy...I was always one of the lower picks." Academic frustrations coupled with social alienation resulted in feelings of hopelessness and a desire to escape his adversities: "I did hit a spell of depression...I tried to commit suicide...I was so depressed." Thankfully, with the support of his parents and counselors, Eric was able to work through his challenges and feel more optimistic and hopeful about his life. Friendships continued to be a struggle for Eric in high school, but
success in sports and a growth in maturity resulted in the development of more positive and closer relationships.

Perhaps due to the challenges Eric has endured, he had become keenly aware of the importance of friends and supporting others. Eric's voice of loneliness seems to have enabled him to develop a caring for others voice. He had a strong desire to help others, especially those who may be going through difficult times. He described putting his own needs aside at times in order to offer assistance and support others. His voice of loneliness enables Eric to empathize with individuals who are also going through hard times. Eric realizes that he may not be able to solve or fix the problems of others, but understands the power of listening and tries to make himself available to those in need.

By listening to the voices that emerged in Eric's I poem, it becomes apparent the significance of relatedness for Eric. Eric's unfulfilled need to feel accepted and loved by others drove him to feelings of despair and hopelessness. Through the support of others, Eric was able to rebound from these struggles and use what he learned about himself to grow into a caring and compassionate friend. When speaking about his most positive university experiences, it is not surprising that Eric described the social scene. Eric was thrilled to be meeting new people and was feeling accepted and liked by his peers. This positive connection to others encourages and seems to motivate Eric to persevere through his challenges.

Alexandra

I might have
I was always getting pulled out
I'd do it
I guess
I felt like
Maybe I'm different from them
I don’t really think so
I was a very free kid

I was so determined
I remember
I saw that award
I was
I was
I guess
I knew
I want that award
I don’t care
I’m going to get that
I was
I really gotta work for this
I was so proud
I was
I was crying
I was
I can’t believe it
I think
I’m not different
I’m getting recognized
I think
I was not defined as learning disabled

From my first phone contact with Alexandra, it was evident that she was eager to
share her story and to participate in this research study. She openly disclosed her
disability to her friends and teachers, and seems to be confident and at peace with herself.
Alexandra received her diagnosis at a young age, alerting her parents and teachers early
on in elementary school to a need for additional support and encouragement. Unlike
many of the other participants, Alexandra reported facing few challenges and adversities
while growing up, having many friends and not feeling upset about her academic
progress. A carefree voice characterizes Alexandra’s approach to life. The first stanza of
Alexandra’s I poem acknowledges her need to receive extra academic assistance, and,
yet, Alexandra did not express frustration or anxiety over her weak school performances.
Rather, Alexandra stated that she did not perceive herself as any different from her peers. She described herself as “a very free kid,” not caring too much about low grades and being able to quickly rebound and move on from disappointments.

During the interviews it was also evident that Alexandra exhibited determination and was able to set and achieve her goals. A voice of determination and pride resonates in the second stanza of Alexandra’s I poem, at first appearing to sharply contrast the carefree voice in the first stanza. Alexandra believed it is her carefree attitude that enables her to take risks and set high goals for herself. The second stanza was taken from an excerpt in her first interview transcript where she was sharing one of her most positive experiences, winning an award in grade 8 for the most improved student. Once Alexandra set her sights on winning that award, she was unwavering in her desire and commitment to make academic improvements. Her hard work and determination resulted in her goal being realized, building confidence in her ability to achieve her aspirations. Although she was at peace with her disability, she wanted to be recognized and understood as more than being disabled.

*Joseph*

I’d sit there
I’d try to listen
I just couldn’t do it
I wouldn’t even be thinking
I’d spend the whole day just sitting there
I wouldn’t pay attention
I would get real upset
I’d be sitting
I’d be sitting trying to learn
I’d get so frustrated
I couldn’t

I’d sit there
I couldn’t pick it up
I'm a huge procrastinator
I'd always leave everything
I'd always just leave it
I'd always leave it
If I started it
I could usually get it done
I'm good at math
I understand it well
I just
I excelled at math
I would never do the homework
I still struggle with it
I'm still a procrastinator
I will say that
But I'm getting better

When I found out
I had this really hard time
I didn't want to take pills
I thought
I don't want to take pills
I don't want to be different
I just did it
I
I
I couldn't read
I guess
I'm so open
I've become okay with it
I don't consider myself in a negative way any different
I'm different
I don't have a problem with it

Two contrapuntal voices are heard in Joseph's I poem: a voice of frustration and a voice of acceptance. When Joseph described what it was like growing up with a learning disability, it becomes clear that his struggles and challenges were not due to lack of effort, intelligence, or longing to succeed. His desire to focus and learn becomes especially evident when listening to Joseph's voice in his I poem: "I'd try to listen...I just couldn't do it... I'd be sitting trying to learn...I couldn't." This disconnect between his effort and his ability to learn created feelings of frustration and anger that continue to
persist into college. Although recognizing medication has helped, and he has developed effective coping strategies, Joseph acknowledged his struggles are far from over: “I’m a huge procrastinator…I still struggle with it…I’m still a procrastinator.”

Although Joseph continues to wrestle with staying focused and completing his school work, it appears he has made significant gains in accepting himself and his limitations. A voice of acceptance is evident in the last five lines of his I poem: “I’m so open…I’ve become okay with it…I don’t consider myself in a negative way any different…I’m different…I don’t have a problem with it.” Joseph felt he is not limited by his disability knowing that it is not a reflection of his intelligence or potential. Although the theme of self-acceptance emerged as a theme through initial analysis of the data, Joseph was the only participant who not only accepts he learns differently from his peers, but now sees these differences as an advantage. He knew that if he could channel his creativity, energy, and interests appropriately, his unique gifts could be used to his advantage. He embraced his differences and was excited about his promising future.

Summary of the Chapter

Chapter Four serves to present the results of this qualitative research study. The first part of this chapter offered four major themes that emerged from the data including: obstacles and challenges, surviving challenges, supportive conditions, and a journey of discovery and hope. The second part of this chapter presented a more personal depiction of each of the 8 participants, uncovering contrapuntal voices evident in their I poems. The participants’ adversities have impacted and shaped the way they perceive themselves, and this became evident in the voices of questioning, despair, sadness and regret, loneliness, and frustration. Their resiliency is signified by convincing and strong
voices of knowing, confidence, optimism, hope, caring, pride, determination, and acceptance.

The dominant obstacles and challenges described by the participants include academic difficulties, lack of understanding and support, social and behavioral struggles, and emotional burdens. Many of these challenges were evident in elementary and high school, and some continue to persist in university and college. All of the participants revealed taking control over their lives by drawing upon strategies, skills, and/or personal qualities. Seven of the participants described the importance of making decisions and setting goals to resume responsibility over their lives. Coping strategies ranged greatly and generally matured over time. Common strategies employed included cheating, procrastination, pretending, giving up, reducing distractions, controlling and limiting the amount and type of work required, employing good study habits, and asking questions.

The dominant personal qualities that participants described as being helpful include: determination, persistence, and intelligence. Five participants relied on diet or medication to help manage their behavior and effects of co-morbid disabilities.

Several external conditions emerged as significant in supporting the participants including positive outlets, emotional support, involved parents, and school support. These conditions helped nurture the participants’ ability to set goals, employ effective strategies, and build personal qualities needed to overcome adversities. Positive outlets, providing an escape and break from challenges, proved to be important elements in developing resiliency in the participants. A continuing journey of discovery and hope surfaced as an additional prevailing theme during the interviews amongst all the participants. Reflecting on their life stories, participants described self-acceptance, a
shifting from thinking of themselves and to a desire to care for and help others, and an optimistic and hopeful view of themselves and their future.
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this research study was to explore resilience factors of university and college students with learning disabilities as revealed through retrospective interviews. Specifically, eight postsecondary students were interviewed to address their perceptions of resiliency. Chapter One introduces this research study by including a background of the problem, the problem context, the purpose of the study, and main research questions. This study addressed the following questions:

1. What are the main barriers and challenges students with learning disabilities perceive they have had to endure?

2. What coping mechanisms, strategies, and personal qualities have students with learning disabilities employed and drawn upon to overcome barriers and challenges?

3. What conditions have maintained and enhanced the motivational tendencies of university and college students with learning disabilities?

Chapter One provides rationale for this study, an introduction to the theoretical framework, scope and limitations of this study, and an outline of the remainder of the document.

Chapter Two provides a review of the literature as it relates to resilience and individuals with learning disabilities. Included in this chapter is a discussion of the shifting paradigms of resilience research evident in the evolving definitions of resilience and learning disabilities, and adoption of risk and resilience models and frameworks to guide continuing research in this area. Additionally, the self-determination theory (Ryan
In Chapter Three, a description of and rationale for the research design, information on the 8 participants and interviewing process including details regarding data collection, recording and instrumentation are included. The data collected in this study were analyzed using the interpretive phenomenological analysis method as described by Smith and Osborn (2003) and an adaptation of the listening guide method developed by Gilligan et al. (2003). The steps used in both of these methods are outlined in this chapter. Chapter Three also includes methodological assumptions, limitations, and a restatement of the problem addressed in this study.

In Chapter Four, I present an overview and summary of the results of this study. The major themes that emerged from the interviews with the participants are discussed under these four major headings: Challenges and Obstacles, Surviving Challenges, Supportive Conditions, and A Journey of Discovery and Hope. The second part of this chapter, "Listening to Participants' Voices", offers a more personal depiction of the participants and the unique contributions their stories made to this study. Participants' first person voices were revealed through the use of I poems and an analysis of the themes and contrapuntal voices as they related to the study's main research question are included in this chapter.

Chapter Five begins with a summary of the research study and continues with a discussion of the research results as they relate to the three main research questions and
to the literature presented in Chapter Two. I conclude Chapter Five with possible implications of this study for theory, practice, and further research.

**Discussion**

The following is a presentation about how the findings of this study relate to the current positions and debates within the field of resiliency and learning disabilities. The three main research questions that guided this study were used to organize and frame the following discussion.

*What are the main barriers and challenges students with learning disabilities perceive they have had to endure?*

Although several themes emerged through data analysis highlighting the prevailing and similar challenges and obstacles faced by the participants, it was evident that these students represent a heterogeneous group. The challenges described were diverse and varied amongst the participants, consistent with Lavoie's (1989) assertion that learning disabilities manifest differently in each individual and over the course of lifetimes depending on the demands of the environment, social supports, and individual abilities and weaknesses. In addition to having learning disabilities, 7 of the 8 participants had additional disabilities as outlined in Table 1. These co-morbid disabilities increased the challenges and frustrations faced by the participants (McNamara et al., 2005; Wong, 2003). Analysis using the listening guide method (Gilligan et al., 2003) provided especially diverse portrayals of the unique inner struggles and battles endured by the participants. Voices of questioning, longing, sadness and regret, fear, despair, loneliness, and frustration were revealed through listening to the participants’ first person voices.
All 8 participants described varying degrees of academic challenges, several of them commenting on their difficulty processing, understanding, and decoding written language. Six participants reported specific challenges related to written expression, finding it extremely difficult to output at the level of their perceived potential and capabilities. Challenges with memory, processing speed, and attention proved to further frustrate the participants, often resulting in assignments taking much longer to complete and more time needed to process and retain new information. These academic challenges perceived by the participants are not surprising as they are consistent with the manifestations of learning disabilities as described in the current definitions of learning disabilities (LDAC, 2002; NJCLD, 2001). The LDAC (2002) official definition describes learning disabilities as:

...a number of disorders which may affect the acquisition, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information...Learning disabilities range in severity and may interfere with the acquisition and use of one or more of the following: oral language...reading...written language...mathematics...

Learning disabilities are lifelong. (p. 1)

Three of the participants described feeling frustrated that their performance in school did not reflect their true potential or capabilities. The LDAC definition acknowledges this disparity stating that despite having impairment in one or more areas related to perceiving, thinking, remembering, or learning, individuals with learning disabilities have at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning.

Both the NJCLD (2001) and LDAC (2002) definitions recognize that learning disabilities may also affect social skills, possibly manifesting as difficulties with social
perception, social interaction, and perspective taking. Seven of the participants described enduring social challenges including having difficulty making, developing, and maintaining friendships. Mather and Ofiesh (2005) suggest that many students with learning disabilities lack strong social networks and struggle with interpersonal skills. Several of the participants recognized social difficulties stemmed in part from their own social deficits and weaknesses. Thomas and Joseph conceded their inappropriate behaviors alienated themselves from their peers, and Smit attributed his difficulty in maintaining friendships to his need for attention. Eric’s voice of loneliness conveyed the deep pain associated with feeling bullied, left out, and alone, especially during his elementary school years. Eric and Darren both struggled with feeling depressed and losing their will to continue living. These feelings are sadly consistent with the literature suggesting that many students with learning disabilities are bullied and teased resulting in feelings of anger, fear, humiliation, and self-doubt (Mather & Ofiesh, 2005). Research by Bender (2004), McNamara et al., (2005) and Bryan et al. (2004) has found that students with learning disabilities are more prone than students without disabilities to loneliness, depression, and suicide.

These weaknesses “in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities” and “self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction” present as internal risk factors inherent to the individual participants (Murray, 2003; NJCLD, 2001, p. 31). By using a risk and resilience model in the present study, an attempt was made to understand the participants holistically by also examining how the complex web of family, school, and community factors contributed to risk factors and presented as additional challenges and barriers
perceived by the participants (Bryan, 2003; Murray, 2003). In this study, 6 participants reported the emotional burden of feeling misunderstood by parents, teachers, and/or peers. Misunderstandings often resulted in inappropriate or insufficient support being provided to these students causing intense feelings of anger, resentment, and frustration. Feeling misunderstood has the potential to be one of the most negative experiences for students (Stage & Milne, 1996) and this was evident in both Casey and Darren’s stories. Lavoie (1989) suggests that teachers may be the least likely people to understand and empathize with struggling students as teachers often did very well in school themselves. Thomas and Smit disclosed feeling unsupported and misunderstood by both their teachers and parents which may have further confounded poor academic performances in their elementary and high school years. Limited parental support and involvement and encouragement has been demonstrated to be highly correlated with school failure (Domagala-Zysk, 2006).

Academic challenges, poor social skills, and feeling misunderstood and unsupported resulted in a host of emotions especially evident in the participants’ I poems. Voices of questioning, despair, sadness and regret, fear, loneliness, and frustration emphasized the daily academic and social battles several of the students in this study faced primarily at school. Repeated academic and social failures tend to erode feelings of competence and confidence, replaced by feelings of being different and lower self-concepts (Mather & Ofiesh, 2005). Mather and Ofiesh suggest that students with learning disabilities have weaker self-determination skills than their non-disabled peers which may result in fear of failure and apprehension when confronting new and/or challenging tasks. It is, therefore, not surprising that 6 of the participants reported
reacting to their adversities with wanting to avoid or procrastinate doing school work and had feelings of being trapped and wanting to escape. These feelings were especially prevalent during their elementary school years when they were constantly confronted with the challenges and failures caused by their learning disabilities. In addition to feelings of frustration, anger, and loneliness, several of the participants expressed a dislike for school and a desire to retreat from the constant reminders of their limitations. These feelings of wanting to escape and being trapped add to the literature surrounding resilience and students with learning disabilities.

What coping mechanisms, strategies, and personal qualities have students with learning disabilities employed and drawn upon to overcome barriers and challenges?

As described above, the participants experienced a range of challenges, all encountering multiple and chronic risks, increasing the likelihood of negative outcomes (Mather & Ofiesh, 2005). It is, therefore, not surprising that the literature indicates that individuals with learning disabilities have poorer outcomes following high school in comparison with their non-disabled peers (Murray & Wren, 2003). Students with learning disabilities are less likely to attend postsecondary school, have higher rates of unemployment, and lower wage jobs (Murray & Wren). Despite these odds, the participants in this study were all experiencing success at college or university.

Participants in this study have developed coping strategies and personal qualities that are enabling them to overcome obstacles.

The results of this study support the foundational elements of Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory which suggests that optimal functioning and healthy development require the attainment of three psychological needs: autonomy, competence,
and relatedness. In this study, participants demonstrated feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and these feelings appeared to improve over the years. Especially in their elementary school years, it can be assumed that weaker self-determination skills resulted in the use of a range of immature coping tactics and strategies in an effort to endure barriers and challenges, achieve goals, accomplish tasks, and prevent further failures and feeling of additional hurt and frustration. For example, Thomas reported cheating in school by copying answers from the teacher’s answer key, and Steven handed in work written by his mother. Other participants revealed feigning understanding, guessing at answers, making excuses, blaming others, and giving up. These coping tactics enabled students to tolerate their sufferings and get through their days.

A hopeful and positive finding in this study is that many of the students’ coping mechanisms improved over time and became more productive and effective as the participants grew in self-determination skills, primarily in knowledge of their strengths, limitations, and personal long-term goals. This growth in self-determination supports the current trend in resilience research which regards resilience as a dynamic and complex process which can be strengthened and nurtured over time. (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Margalit, 2004). The finding are also consistent with previous studies and findings by Hutchinson et al. (2004), Mason et al. (2004), Murray (2003) and Thoma and Getzel (2005) which have all revealed the importance of self-determination. Self-determination has surfaced as one of the most important factors for increasing resilience in individuals with learning disabilities (Murray; Thoma & Getzel).
Although none of the participants used the term “self-determination,” they clearly displayed the characteristics of self-determined learners. Field et al. (2003) define self-determination as:

...a combination of skills, knowledge and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one’s strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective are essential in self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults in our society. (pp. 339-340)

An improvement in participants’ coping strategies and skills may have been due to a growth in self-determination skills along with conditions supporting more opportunities to make choices. As students in this study progressed through school, they grew in autonomy as they were allowed to make more decisions, set goals, and were granted increased independence.

In this study, 7 participants spoke passionately about the significance of setting goals and taking ownership over their lives. This is consistent with the need for autonomy in the self-determination theory, and the first part of the self-determination definition by Field et al. (2003) which states self-determined learners engage in “goal-directed, self-regulated, and autonomous behavior” (p. 339). For example, Alexandra believes she has been able to attend university and achieve a level of success because she wanted to: “It’s up to your own will...You have to want to do it...it’s always up to the individual to figure out what they ultimately want.”
Once goals were established, participants in this study found ways to self-regulate their behavior, enabling them to more effectively achieve their goals. Self-regulating behaviors varied amongst the participants, but included behaviors such as choosing homework locations wisely to limit distractions, setting aside the same time everyday to complete homework, taking reduced course loads, recording lectures to listen to again later, and working ahead on assignments. Five of the participants relied on medication or a modified diet to further assist their attempts to regulate and control their actions and behaviors. Determination and persistence emerged as important internal qualities that enabled participants in this study to regulate their behavior and carry on despite roadblocks and setbacks. For example, Casey believed her determination and ability to solve problems have been central to her resilience. When asked what qualities have been most significant in overcoming her obstacles, she responded: “My strength, my drive, my determination. I’ll get it done, and I’ll go through life. Sometimes it won’t be pretty, but I’ll get it done.” Thomas and Smit spoke about how important effort and persistence are for them in achieving their goals. Eric, Alexandra, and Joseph all acknowledged the importance of their ability to solve problems and ask for help when needed. These findings are consistent with themes that emerged from a study with four college students with learning disabilities conducted by Sarver:

All the participants in the qualitative investigation appeared to accept responsibility for carrying out plans to achieve their goals...The ability to think flexibly is of key importance for students with learning disabilities in ways that take account of their disabilities...Students in the study responded to questions
about persistence by stating that it was essential to academic success. (cited in Field et al., 2003, p. 342)

The students in this study by Sarver (cited in Field et al., 2003) were able to successfully carry out plans to achieve their goals because they also had an understanding of their disability and limitations.

This understanding of strengths and limitations is another important characteristic of self-determined learners (Field et al., 2003). Self-awareness enables individuals with learning disabilities to set realistic goals and seek educational and vocational opportunities that integrate and emphasize their strengths (Mather & Ofiesh, 2005). In this study, participants were able to articulate areas of personal weaknesses and limitations. Because of this self-awareness, the students in this study were able to employ and develop more effective coping and learning strategies. Not only did self-awareness assist the participants in coping with their weaknesses, students in this study spoke enthusiastically about positive outlets which nurtured and accentuated their gifts, talents, and interests. Knowledge of their strengths enabled the participants in this study to choose courses and programs of study where success was more likely. The participants also chose to be involved in sports, competitions, part-time jobs, and music activities, feeling positive about their ability to excel and be successful. This result further supports the importance of the need for competence in the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Individuals experience competence when they feel they are successful and have influence on their surroundings (Bryan & Solomon, 2007).

Successful experiences, especially ones in which individuals believe to be personally responsibly for the success, build feelings of competence.
In the review of related literature, it became evident that much emphasis has been placed on the importance of setting goals, achieving goals, and understanding strengths and weaknesses. Formal curriculum and informal teaching of self-determination skills has focused primarily on student involvement in setting goals and planning IEPs (Karvonen et al., 2004; Mason et al., 2004), with little apparent emphasis on promoting feelings of being confident in one's capabilities and effectiveness. According to the self-determination definition, personal beliefs about oneself are critical and must be combined with goal directed behaviors and an understanding of one's strengths and limitations (Field et al, 2003).

In this study, participants exhibited optimism and a positive attitude about their circumstances and accomplishments. Voices of optimism and pride were evident in two I poems and emerged as a significant theme amongst all of the transcripts. Alvord and Grados (2005) assert having a proactive orientation is a primary characteristic defining resilience and define it as: "taking initiative in one's own life and believing in one's own effectiveness" (p. 239). Although many of the participants in this study continue to wrestle with various challenges in university and college, all 8 spoke of improvements in personal skills, attitudes, and their situations. Despite repeated failures and painful past experiences, I was surprised by how positive the participants were about their present circumstances and that 4 participants clearly articulated an optimistic outlook for their futures. Several examples emerged through data analysis: Casey described failing to complete an assignment for her graduate course on time and commented, "I can take the hit." Smit's I poem reveals a theme of optimism as he stated: "I'll be fine." Alexandra and Steven both spoke about their confidence that whatever challenges present during
their life journeys will work out in the end for good. For Darren, he considered his hopefulness and optimism for a better future the most important qualities of his resilience. Although the themes of hopefulness and optimism emerged as significant character traits in this study, little emphasis is placed on these important qualities in the literature surrounding resilience and individuals with learning disabilities. The self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and research by Maston (2001) on resilience is certainly based on a premise of hope; yet, the roles of hope and optimism as personality traits are less well explored in the resilience literature. How could and should people supporting individuals with learning disabilities nurture and emphasize feelings of hopefulness? What specific supportive conditions are significant in building these positive personal beliefs about themselves and their futures? What informal and formal strategies could be used to intentionally promote optimism about oneself? More research is needed to address these issues and questions.

An additional finding in this study receiving only limited attention in the review of related literature is the significance of self-acceptance. Thoma and Getzel (2005) assert that ability to set and achieve goals is possible on a basis of knowing and valuing oneself. All of the participants in this study self-disclosed their learning disability and willingly participated in this study, wanting to share their stories of overcoming obstacles. They exhibited feelings of pride and satisfaction about the challenges they have overcome and have grown to not only accept themselves, but many participants in this study also embraced and celebrated their differences. For example, Darren stated: “I’ve always embraced my differences and always embraced that I know I don’t walk the same path as everyone else.” Joseph believed his disability is an advantage because he
knows his unique energy and abilities can be channeled to help him achieve even more than average learners. Smit and Casey love their energy and zest for life and are thankful they are not “boring” individuals like many of their peers without disabilities. While listening to their first person voices, this theme was again evident. Joseph’s I poem revealed a voice of acceptance, and Steven’s I poem, a voice of knowing. Through much questioning and self-reflection, Steven has not only come to know himself well, but has also arrived at a place of peace regarding his differences and disabilities. The participants in this study revealed that self-acceptance has improved over time as they have grown in knowledge about their disabilities. Successful experiences and the development of better coping tactics and have further nurtured and encouraged feelings of pride, satisfaction, and self-acceptance.

The third psychological need identified in the self-determination theory is relatedness, which is the need to feel closely connected, cared for, and loved by others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Although the implications of relatedness are more fully addressed in the following section which discusses conditions that have supported and maintained the participants’ motivational tendencies, it is worth noting here that 6 participants in this study exhibited helpfulness as a significant personality trait. When describing relationships with peers, friends, and family members, it became evident that helping others further nurtured feelings of pride, self-acceptance, and self-esteem. Brooks (2005) suggests that helping others is a powerful way to build resiliency in all children as these relationships and opportunities provide safe places to take risks, learn from mistakes, and develop gifts and talents. These benefits were evident in this study as participants described positive experiences of assisting classmates study, helping friends overcome
personal problems, and serving and caring for family members. Students with learning disabilities are often the recipients of help, but in this study, opportunities to give back and help others were mutually beneficial. Several participants appeared to value that their existence was not solely based on drawing on support, but one that allowed them opportunities to contribute to other members of society and a community of learners.

Parents and teachers can assist individuals with learning disabilities by encouraging and orchestrating opportunities for them to use their strengths and build relationships by helping in their schools, family and/or community (Brooks).

What conditions have maintained and enhanced the motivational tendencies of university and college students with learning disabilities?

In this study, several conditions emerged that alleviated the impacts of challenges and adversities. These supportive conditions allowed gifts and talents to be nurtured, encouraged participants to make and achieve personal goals, fostered greater feelings of optimism and acceptance, and enhanced motivational tendencies. These results are consistent with the self-determination theory which postulates that conditions which foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness can increase intrinsic motivation and greater internalization and integration of extrinsically motivated behaviors (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The results also support the accumulating data on resilience research which suggest that the phenomenon of resilience is the result of normal, ordinary processes that take place within individuals and in their relationships with others (Masten, 2001).

Participants in this study described the importance of participating in intrinsically motivating behaviors, which emerged through data analysis as positive outlets. The dominant positive outlets identified were islands of academic competence, sports and
physical activity, and community involvement. Ryan and Deci (2000) define intrinsic motivation as the "natural inclination toward assimilation, master, spontaneous interest, and exploration that is so essential to cognitive and social development and that represents a principal source of enjoyment and vitality throughout life" (p. 70). In this study, positive outlets provided participants with sources of enjoyment, pride, optimism, and confidence. Successful accomplishments in academic or other domains have the potential to help nurture feelings of competence and offset feelings of low self-concepts (Mather & Ofiesh, 2005). This was certainly evident in Steven's life as he described the positive role math competitions served for him in elementary and high school: "The challenge certainly invigorated me, and I think it helped me feel optimistic about my academic potential because was doing well, really well at something, better than my peers at something, so I could sort of keep up with other things." Similarly, Darren's success in math courses helped build his confidence in the social domain, an area he has always found challenging. Smit enjoyed working at a shoe store during his high school years where his verbal skills were accentuated. These positive outlets emphasized and nurtured areas of strengths and played important roles in building resilience and improving self-esteem (Mather & Ofiesh). Brooks (2005) and Alvord and Grados (2005) emphasize the role parents can play in de-emphasizing areas of weaknesses and fostering areas of strength to encourage competence, pride, and successful accomplishments. Teachers and support personnel must be concerned about holistic engagement, considering the diverse needs and gifts of individual students with and without learning disabilities to provide their students with an effective, well-rounded, and emotionally sound education.
It is evident that positive outlets also played supportive roles by simply providing participants with much needed respites from their daily challenges. When participants described what it was like growing up and living with learning disabilities, a theme of *feeling trapped/wanting to escape* emerged. Positive outlets proved to be a productive and effective response to these negative and confining feelings. For example, Joseph described biking as an enjoyable and important activity in his life: “You’re free. You can go wherever you want...It’s a good kind of freedom, I’d say.” Physical activity allowed Eric much needed time away from school work: “I find just getting yourself involved always helped me. Just having something to take my mind off the stress of school for a bit.” Thomas appreciated teachers who incorporated hands-on activities into lessons as it gave him a much needed “break from the reality of bookwork.” It appears that relief from repeated negative experiences is crucial to the participants’ well-being and healthy development.

In addition to involvement in at least one positive outlet, participants described the importance of being involved in supportive relationships with others. This again is consistent with the self-determination theory which emphasizes the innate need to feel loved and cared for by others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Relationships and involvement by parents played particularly significant roles in the lives of the participants. Heiman and Dariv (2004) also consider supportive relationships one of the most important protective factors in building resilience. Heiman and Dariv use the term *social support* to identify this factor and define it as an “individual’s perceived belief that they can obtain help or empathy when needed and their satisfaction with available support” (p. 442).
In this study, parents, friends, and teachers were emotionally supportive and involved in the daily lives of the participants. Understanding and acceptance emerged as a theme amongst all 8 of the participants when describing positive experiences and the role others have played in supporting them. Often, challenges left them feeling alienated, different from their peers, and unsupported by teachers and/or parents. It is encouraging that although misunderstandings appeared to be widespread, participants seemed to need only as few as one or two loving, understanding, and empathetic people in their lives (Brooks, 2005). Empathetic persons have the capacity to place themselves inside the shoes of [others] to see the world through their eyes" and are able to "appreciate and validate their point of view" (Brooks, p. 301). Participants spoke about the importance of feeling like others could sympathize with their adversities, connecting well with people who have also experienced challenges. For example, Casey felt understood by a university professor who shared with her stories of his own struggles in school. Joseph and Steven felt understood by their fathers who have disabilities similar to their own. Although Darren and Alexandra are the only ones in their immediate families with diagnosed disabilities, they both conveyed the importance of feeling unconditional love and understanding from their families. Smit shared stories of being painfully misunderstood by his family and teachers, but speaks highly of the staff in the disabilities services office because they are the few people in his life who understand him and his disability.

Understanding was closely connected to feeling accepted. Brooks (2005) has identified accepting persons for who they are and not what we want them to be as a key practice for fostering resilience in children. Alexandra and Casey are able to relax in the
confidence of knowing that their parents accept them unconditionally and celebrate their unique gifts. Darren felt being accepted by his family and friends has been critical to his survival and ability to continue fighting to overcome adversities: “When I do have people who want to socialize with me, who like me, who think I’m funny, that is enormous. That keeps me going…” It is possible that feeling accepted and understood by others boosts self-understanding, self-knowledge, and self-esteem. Several researchers have identified the importance of children and youth feeling unconditionally understood and accepted by others (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Brooks; Masten, 2001; Mather & Ofiesh, 2005)

In this study, encouragement was identified as an important supportive factor. Encouragement encompassed a broad range of methods used to support, persuade, and promote desired behaviors. Participants spoke positively about the significance of encouraging comments and high expectations from others. Six of the participants described warm and loving parents who provided them with praise and encouragement for their efforts. Four of the participants also described encouragement in the form of parental pressure to improve grades and/or attend postsecondary school. Zhan (2006) suggests that parental expectations and attitudes are strong predictors of actual performances and actions, especially college attendance. Only 1 participant described fearing negative consequences from teachers and parents as a result of poor behavior and academic performances. Encouraging comments and even negative consequences may have been effective in building resilience in the participants because they were understood to be rooted in compassion, love, and confidence in their ability to succeed.
Active parental involvement in the lives of 6 participants emerged as an additional theme amongst the transcripts. In this study, parents were involved in teaching academic skills, providing homework assistant, advocating for supports and services, and being physically and emotionally available for their children. As Domagala-Zysk (2006) suggests, supportive relationships with parents are critical for children and youth to manage various tasks both in and out of school. General education research by Zhan (2006) and Gonzalez (2002) demonstrates that parental involvement, such as offering homework assistance, attending school functions, and communicating with staff, improves engagement and academic learning. Although these findings are not specific to students with learning disabilities, they may also inform and illuminate the importance of parental involvement for all students.

Supportive schools emerged as an additional supportive factor amongst the transcripts. As discussed earlier in this chapter, several participants felt unsupported and misunderstood by elementary and high school staff, adding to their risk factors. In contrast, when describing university experiences with professors and support staff at the disability services offices, participants raved about the assistance and support they received. Casey’s relationships with a professor and Smit’s interactions with the staff in the disability services office have been among their most positive university experiences. Thomas and Steven credit the extra support and services provided at university with their ability to be successful in their courses. These differences and increased positive experiences in postsecondary school may be attributed to environments that are nurturing the needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Respective, personable, and approachable professors helped the participants to feel cared for and significant. For
example, Joseph shared a story of one of his professors addressing him by name before his first class even started, and Darren described the importance of his professors getting to know him: "My professors in all my courses made me feel like I was a person and not just a number in their class. They talked to me and asked me what I wanted to do..."

Research by Bryan and Solomon (2007) and Field et al. (2003) support these findings by suggesting that self-determination is strongly influenced by various factors including the availability of accessible and caring teachers.

Academic competence in this study was cultivated in university, primarily by the staff at the disability services offices. Participants described workshops and training seminars available to offer instruction on specific writing and reading skills and use of assistive technology. Staff is available for one-on-one counseling to provide academic and personal support, offering encouragement and guidance regarding course and program selection. Modifications and extra academic support are facilitated for the participants, including access to tutoring, note takers, extension on assignments, and additional time for tests and exams. These findings support recommendations by Palmer and Wehmeyer (2003) suggesting that students should be provided with modeling, direct instruction, and scaffolding to strengthen self-determination skills.

Students in this study spoke positively about their increased freedom and independence in postsecondary school to make choices and select courses and programs that accentuated personal strengths and interests. Although participants described facing various challenges in university and college, personal goals motivated them to persist through adversities. Participants described being extrinsically motivated by wanting to achieve a sense of pride and achieve their goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Being involved in
decision making regarding accommodations needed and having the freedom to disclose their disabilities further nurtured feelings of autonomy.

Although research has demonstrated the importance of teaching self-determination skills to students, this study supports the findings that it is, unfortunately, rarely happening in elementary schools (Hutchinson et al., 2004; Mason et al., 2004; Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003; Thoma & Getzel, 2005). Young students are frequently left out of decision making opportunities and development of their IEPs (Karvonen et al., 2004). In this study, Joseph was the only participant who recalled participating in team meetings during middle school to establish academic goals. In general, participants were given more choices in high school, but continued to be left out of many opportunities to make educational decisions and goals. Several participants expressed feeling particularly left out of decision making opportunities in elementary school and feeling frustrated about not being able to keep up with their peers. Tomlinson’s (1999) recommendations for creating differentiated classrooms by modifying and scaffolding curriculum, building upon strengths, ensuring success for all learners, and providing students with choices, would enhance feelings of self-determination and a more positive mindset. In contrast to the generally negative elementary experiences with teachers, supportive relationships and accommodations by staff at colleges and universities were appreciated by the participants in this study and helped nurture motivational levels and resiliency.

Implications

The results of this study have contributed to the existing theory surrounding students with learning disabilities and resilience. I believe important information
regarding implications for current practice have emerged and have prompted several implications further research.

*Implications for Theory*

I believe four potential contributions were made to theory as a result of this research. First, it adds *feeling trapped/wanting to escape* as a response to chronic and multiple risk factors in the lives of students with learning disabilities. Although it has been identified that students with learning disabilities experience more feelings of anger, fear, humiliation (Mather & Ofiesh, 2005) and are more prone to depression and suicide (Bender, 2004; Bryan et al., 2004), the themes of *feeling trapped* and *wanting to escape* seems to further illuminates the despair and pain that can be experienced by students with learning disabilities.

Second, it extends the need for students with learning disabilities to be provided with positive outlets to not only accentuate strengths and promote feelings of self-worth and optimism (Brooks, 2005; Lavoie, 1989), but also to simply provide students with relief and respite from constant challenges. In this study, positive outlets had the potential to grant students a much desired break from repeated failures and chronic struggles socially and/or academically.

Third, it provides evidence of the need for children and youth to feel autonomous (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The importance of self-determination has come up repeatedly in the resilience literature (Hutchinson et al., 2004; Mason et al., 2004; Murray, 2003; Thoma & Getzel, 2005), but according to the participants in this study, it appears little is being done to foster these skills in elementary and high school (Karvonen et al., 2004; Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003). This study further highlights the need to begin intentionally
teaching and fostering self-determination to young children with learning disabilities. Several participants recalled craving more opportunities to make decisions and choices, especially early on in their elementary school careers.

Fourth, it extends the literature surrounding personality traits and characteristics of resilient learners. In this study, themes of optimism about one’s capabilities and potential and self-acceptance emerged as contributors to building resilient mind-sets. Although optimism and self-acceptance have received some recognition in the resilience literature (Field et al., 2003; Murray, 2003), little emphasis appears to be placed on their significance or how to best nurture these attributes.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study may hold implications for teachers, administrators, families, and friends of students with learning disabilities. Encouragingly, it appears that extraordinary supports and qualities are not required (Masten, 2001). In this study, the participants’ ability to overcome adversity was largely attributed to various multiple and interrelated contexts as illustrated in Figure 1. All of these risk and protective contexts, including personal and external factors, must be considered when promoting resilience, but it appears the specific combinations of conditions and attributes that foster resilience are distinct for each individual. After data analysis, I created a figure to summarize graphically the dominant internal and external factors that emerged from the 8 participants in this study as significant factors for promoting resilience in university and college students with learning disabilities. The overlapping circles in Figure 2 illustrate the close, dynamic, and interrelated relationship between the internal and external factors.
Feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness

Internal Factors

Self-Determination:
Ability to set and achieve goals, self-regulating behaviors, self-awareness and self-acceptance.

Additional Personal Qualities:
Determined, persistent, intelligent, hopeful, optimistic, athletic, and helpful.

Resilient Student with Learning Disabilities

External Factors

School Support:
Accessible, caring staff, accommodations, modifications and technological support available.

Involved Parents:
Facilitate learning new skills, provide homework help, and advocate for child.

Emotional Support:
Encouragement, understanding and acceptance, high expectations from others.

Figure 2. Summary of protective factors.
and the student with learning disabilities. All the factors influence and are influenced by feelings of autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

The specific combination and relationship of factors varied considerably for each individual student. For this reason, it appears to be crucial that the unique circumstances, needs, and characteristics of individuals with learning disabilities be recognized to provide the most effective and emotionally sound assistance. This will take time, persistence, and care on the part of those serving students with learning disabilities, but it is an avenue that can provide the most effective and emotionally sound education. Although it is apparent that a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between all these factors is yet to be realized (Zhang et al., 2005), this study suggests that several supportive conditions and skills are significant.

In order for students with learning disabilities to improve educational outcomes and become self-starting and self-motivated lifelong learners able to adapt to life's difficult circumstances, they need to develop self-determination skills. Even at a very early age, individuals with learning disabilities benefit from opportunities to make choices that allow them to experience control and competence in their lives (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003; Zhang et al., 2005). Opportunities to be involved in planning education goals, monitoring their own progress, and involvement in positive outlets that accentuate strengths and interests have the potential to be advantageous for students with learning disabilities. A holistic approach to education, not just one with an academic focus, can provide support to students with learning disabilities. A differentiated approach to education would help meet the diverse and individual needs of students with learning differences (Tomlinson, 1999). Parents and teachers may be unaware of the
significance of the various supportive conditions and would benefit from information and ongoing training to better support students of all ages with learning disabilities.

This study has reported on the significance of providing students with learning disabilities continuing and lifelong emotional support. This support comes in many forms, but in this study participants expressed the importance of receiving encouragement, understanding, acceptance, and love from parents, teachers and friends. Emotionally supportive conditions have the potential to foster greater feelings of relatedness, autonomy, optimism, and self-acceptance. Parents and teachers can provide further emotional support by de-emphasizing weaknesses and encouraging students to find outlets that nurture strengths and provide relief from ongoing and chronic difficulties. These outlets may also include opportunities to help and serve others in their families, schools, and communities.

According to the participants in this study, students with learning disabilities could benefit from taking advantage of the external resources and supports available to them throughout their school years and beyond. Participants encouraged others with learning disabilities to seek help and ask for assistance when needed. Furthermore, accepting and understanding limitations and abilities seems to have the potential of advancing feelings of optimism and confidence.

Implications for Further Research

The results of this study have pointed to several implications for further research that could be addressed to gain a deeper understanding of resilience factors of individuals with learning disabilities. These implications include the following:
Continued use of the risk and resilience model to explore the impacts of internal and external factors on the short and long-term outcomes of individuals with learning disabilities with and without co-morbid disabilities.

To explore the resilience factors of adults with learning disabilities in the workforce.

Continued use of the listening guide method (Gilligan et al., 2003) as a means of helping researchers uncover needs and strengths of individuals with learning disabilities.

Further exploration of the differences between students exhibiting resilient and non-resilient behaviors to identify which protective factors buffer against risk factors. For example, what are the differences between a sample of participants who have dropped out of high school or postsecondary school and students who have successfully completed college or university?

To continue conducting longitudinal studies tracking the development of students with learning disabilities over the course of several different developmental and transition periods from early childhood to adulthood.

Further exploration is needed on how to most effectively promote self-determination skills, especially focusing on developmentally appropriate practices to be used with elementary school aged children with learning disabilities. In addition, what types of in-service training methods would be most effective in teaching support personnel and teachers ways to promote resilient mindsets in their students with learning disabilities?
Conclusion

This study examined resilience factors of university and college students with disabilities as revealed through retrospective interviews. This study has added to the existing literature surrounding resilience especially as it relates to individuals with learning disabilities. Additional insight may have been provided by this study regarding the emotional impacts of repeated and chronic risks on students with learning disabilities. Specifically, a theme of feeling trapped/wanting to escape emerged as a reaction to adversity faced during elementary school years. Furthermore, this study has demonstrated that for several of the participants, the benefits of positive outlets extended beyond nurturing areas of strength and self-esteem to also include providing the provision of a short respite from their challenges to enhance their feelings of overall well-being. Additionally, this study may add to the existing literature surrounding character traits evident in resilient students, specifically highlighting the significance of optimism and self-acceptance.
References


National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD, 2001). *Collective perspectives on issues affecting learning disabilities: Position papers, statements, and reports.* Austin, TX: PRO-ED.


Appendix A

Official Definition of Learning Disabilities
Adopted by the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada January 30, 2002

Learning disabilities refer to a number of disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning. As such, learning disabilities are distinct from global intellectual deficiency.

Learning disabilities result from impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning. These include, but are not limited to: language processing; phonological processing; visual spatial processing; processing speed; memory and attention; and executive functions (e.g. planning and decision-making).

Learning disabilities range in severity and may interfere with the acquisition and use of one or more of the following:
- oral language (e.g. listening, speaking, understanding);
- reading (e.g. decoding, phonetic knowledge, word recognition, comprehension);
- written language (e.g. spelling and written expression); and
- mathematics (e.g. computation, problem solving).

Learning disabilities may also involve difficulties with organizational skills, social Perception, social interaction, and perspective taking.

Learning disabilities are lifelong. The way in which they are expressed may vary over an individuals lifetime, depending on the interaction between the demands of the environment and the individuals strengths and needs. Learning disabilities are suggested by unexpected academic under-achievement or achievement which is maintained only by unusually high levels of effort and support.

Learning disabilities are due to genetic and/or neurobiological factors or injury that alters brain functioning in a manner which affects one or more processes related to learning. These disorders are not due primarily to hearing and/or vision problems, socio-economic factors, cultural or linguistic differences, lack of motivation or ineffective teaching, although these factors may further complicate the challenges faced by individuals with learning disabilities. Learning disabilities may co-exist with various conditions including attentional, behavioral and emotional disorders, sensory impairments or other medical conditions.

For success, individuals with learning disabilities require early identification and timely specialized assessments and interventions involving home, school, community and workplace settings. The interventions need to be appropriate for each individual’s learning disability subtype and, at a minimum, include the provision of: specific skill instruction; accommodations; compensatory strategies; and self-advocacy skills.
Appendix B

Clearance from Brock University Research Ethics Board

Office of Research Services
Research Ethics Office
St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada  L2S 3A1
T: 905-688-5550, Ext. 3035/48*6  F: 905-688-0748

DATE: August 31, 2006
FROM: Linda Rose-Krasnor, Chair
       Research Ethics Board (REB)
TO: Alice Schutz, Education
    Tracy Bulthuis
FILE: 06-022 BULTHUIS
TITLE: Resilience Factors of University Students with Learning Disabilities as Revealed Through Retrospective Interviews

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

DECISION: Accepted as clarified; however, please add a statement to the consent form indicating why transcripts will be retained indefinitely (e.g., for publishing purposes or in case the researcher continues this research as part of a PhD program.

This project has received ethics clearance for the period of August 31, 2006 to April 30, 2007 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.

LRK/bb
Appendix C

Interview Protocol for First Interview

Introduction:

Thank you for participating in my study. I am researching resilience factors as perceived by third and fourth year university students with learning disabilities. The purpose of this study is to explore the factors students with learning disabilities consider to have been significant in contributing to their ability to overcome obstacles and spring back from adversities to healthy development. Results from this study may be used to provide direction for planning effective and well-grounded activities, resources and intervention and prevention programs for students with learning disabilities.

I am going to ask you questions designed to encourage you to speak freely and openly about your experiences as a student with learning disabilities. You are under no obligation to answer any question that you feel is invasive, inappropriate or offensive. You have the right to withdraw from this interview at any time without penalty. Feel free to ask me questions at any point.

This interview is being audio-taped to ensure that I am able to accurately capture your ideas and opinions. I will send you a copy of the transcript in a few days to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or clarify any points that you wish.

All information will be kept confidential and your name will not be associated with your answers. Is there a name other than your own that you would like to use for this interview?

Growing Up:

1. Describe what it was like growing up with a learning disability.
   - What type of learning disability have you been diagnosed with?
   - When did you receive this diagnosis? Describe how this impacted you.

2. Describe a success or positive experience you had in school.
   - What were your favourite parts of a typical day in elementary or high school?

3. Tell me about some of the biggest challenges, obstacles, or frustrations you faced in school. How did you typically deal with these?

4. Tell me about the kinds of supports you received while in elementary and high school.

5. What did you do after school?
• Any hobbies, interests, clubs or activities in or out of school?

6. Describe your relationships with classmates and friends.
• Tell me about your closest friend(s). What did you do with these friend(s)?
• Were there any classmates that you did not get along with? Why?

University Experiences:

7. So far, what do you consider to have been the most positive university experiences?

8. What have been the biggest challenges, obstacles and/or frustrations you have had to deal with at university?

9. What personal qualities and skills do you consider have been most significant in helping you overcome your adversities?

10. Tell me about the role others have played in supporting you while in university.

Conclusion:
Thank you very much for participating. I will send you a copy of the transcript in a few days and will contact you within 1-2 weeks to set up a second interview of approximately 30 minutes. Upon completion of my research, I will make an executive summary of the results available to you.
Appendix D

Interview Protocol for Second Interview

The questions for this interview will evolve from the data analysis of the first interview. Though the exact wording cannot be predicted, they could be similar to the following:

Introduction:

Thank you for participating in my study. As you are aware, I am researching resilience factors as perceived by third and fourth year university students with learning disabilities. The purpose of this study is to explore the factors students with learning disabilities consider to have been significant in contributing to their ability to overcome obstacles and spring back from adversities to healthy development.

Once again, I am going to ask you questions designed to encourage you to speak freely and openly about your experiences as a student with learning disabilities. You are under no obligation to answer any question that you feel is invasive, inappropriate or offensive. You have the right to withdraw from this interview at any time without penalty. Feel free to ask me questions at any point. All information will be kept confidential and your name will not be associated with your answers. This interview is being audio-taped, and you will have an opportunity see the transcript of the interview to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or clarify any points that you wish.

1. In our last interview you talked about personal qualities and skills you consider to have been important in overcoming the barriers in your life.
   • Tell me how these qualities have been nurtured and fostered.
   • Describe how you learned these skills.

2. What person do you consider to have had the biggest impact on your success?
   • Why?
   • Can you give me some examples of how this person has helped you?

3. What suggestions do you have for helping other students with learning disabilities overcome their challenges and adversities?
   • When should this start?
   • Role of parents, peers, teachers, others?

4. Is there anything else that you would like to add related to what we’ve talked about during the interviews?

Conclusion:
Thanks again for participating in the interviews. Your contributions are valued and important. An executive summary of the results will be made available to you upon completion of this study. Please feel free to contact me with any further questions or comments regarding this study.