

MELISSA, TRISHA, AND RUTH: HEARING THE VOICES OF
THREE HOME SCHOOLED ADOLESCENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

by

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ABSTRACT

The intent of this study was to explore the life and values of three home schooled female adolescents with learning disabilities and their families, to determine the level of social inclusion for the students, and to examine academic individualization within the learning process of these students. The data were collected through interviews with teaching parents, the students, and non-parent coaches or teachers. Observations took place in the home and outside the home in various locations for each student. Socially, the role of interest, context, friendships, and social networks were all significant factors. Academically, the home school environment provided a dynamic intersection of different schooling environments with instructional characteristics that were deemed essential for learning.

Despite the differences among families, the themes were similar across the case studies. The social landscape of these students looks different from regularly schooled children, but it is healthy, with many opportunities for friendship and social networks. The academic environment allows for the advantages of tutorial and small-group instruction as well as opportunities to be included in larger, classroom-style groups in certain contexts. These three case studies demonstrate that home schooling can support the needs of children with learning disabilities through instructional strategies and through contextual advantages. For non-home schoolers, the qualities found within this context are promising and worth considering in other educational environments.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Opportunity

A chance.
An opportunity to make the best of your life.
Take it,
Take it and see what God will do.

Become a dancer.
Dance the dance of your life.
Dance it,
Dance as if everything is new.

Become a singer.
Sing your heart song.
Sing it,
Sing your heart song to the King.

Melissa

When I first read this poem from Melissa, I thought, this is the story of my thesis, or perhaps of my life: a story of dance, a dance around schedules, around people and around circumstances. It has also been my song, though, a song that I have projected to people around me and, hopefully, to people in the future. It has been an opportunity, an opportunity of a lifetime that has allowed me to explore and examine subject matter that is close to my heart. Despite the challenges, it has been a wondrous journey, full of people and ideas that have inspired me and have expanded my thinking. I am full of appreciation for the people who have enabled this opportunity.

First and foremost, I want to thank God who has given me the many gifts that are required to gain this type of education. I have worked long enough with children with learning disabilities to appreciate the gifts of reading, listening, discernment, concentration, and organization. It is up to us to use those gifts for the betterment of

others, and I hope that this thesis was one step in my ongoing journey to lead and teach others.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Mainstream schooling presents significant challenges for the child with learning disabilities (Lynch & Irvine, 2009; Pavri & Luftig, 2000; Zigmond, Kloo, & Volonino, 2009). As a result, many parents seek alternatives in education for their children as a way to address the children's needs (Ensign, 2000; Littky & Allen, 1999; Schmidt, 2003). Alternatives can take the form of smaller schools, private schools, tutoring, and schools with alternative philosophies of education, such as Montessori and Waldorf, as well as home schooling. All of these systems have different things to offer and can provide meaningful and valuable environments for the children who attend them. Many families access these systems through much effort, yet with great enthusiasm. Indeed, a significant number of the children who pursue their education in these environments have learning differences that make learning in mainstream environments more difficult (Arai, 2000; Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010; Knowles, Muchmore, & Spaulding, 1994; Littky & Allen, 1999). What is it about these environments that make the families consider them so valuable?

This thesis examined one of these possibilities, the educational alternative of home schooling, as it relates to students with learning disabilities and their families. It is an alternative that comes at great personal and financial cost, and it is an alternative that is extensively molded and created by the people who are a part of it (Davies & Aurini, 2003; Ensign, 2000; Mayberry, Knowles, Ray, & Marlow, 1995). Why then did these families choose to home school, particularly since they had children with learning disabilities?

Home schooling is a significant commitment in terms of lifestyle and time; however, substantial numbers of people in both Canada and the United States are choosing to engage in this educational endeavour (Arai, 2000; Medlin, 2000; Ray, 1999). Accurate statistical numbers are hard to come by, because many home schooling parents choose not to register as home schoolers with their state or province. However, several researchers have spent considerable time trying to gauge the population of home schoolers. In the United States, it has been estimated that the number of home schoolers is 2 million (Ray, 2000; Rudner, 1998). In Canada, the numbers have been estimated as high as 80,000 (Basham, 2001). Given that the number of children with learning disabilities in the general population ranges between 5-10% (Duvall, Ward, Delquadri, & Greenwood, 1997), estimates of the home schooled population with learning disabilities (LD) could be as much as 200,000 in the U.S. and 8,000 children in Canada. As a 2003 *Ottawa Citizen* article, "Tired of the System, Parents of Special Needs Children Turn to Home Schooling," stated, "the stories from across the country of parents with special needs children are eerily similar" (Schmidt, 2003). It is these stories that this thesis sought to understand.

Purpose

The central focus of this thesis was to understand the meanings and values that three home school families, with children having learning disabilities (LD), allocated to their activities, especially since so little research had been done about this part of the home schooling experience (Duffey, 2002; Duvall, Delquadri, Ward, & Greenwood, 1997; Ensign, 2000; Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010; Medlin, 2000). I attempted to unravel and

understand the “uniqueness, complexity and contextual embeddedness” of the individual home schooling family with a child having LD as well as the larger phenomenon of which it was a part (Schram, 2006, p. 107). Therefore, I wanted to hear the voice of the student, surrounded by the voices of family and a teacher/mentor, as they collectively negotiated the path of home schooling and accommodating the needs of the student’s learning disability—particularly as the journey related to the issues of social inclusion and academic individualization.

To further the purpose of this study, three objectives were pursued: (1) to examine the life and values of the children and their families in the case studies of this study; (2) to determine the level of social inclusion of the child with a learning disability within the home school environment both internally (amongst siblings, teaching parents) and externally (at outside activities such as the home school co-op, community activities, and external lessons); (3) to examine academic individualization in the learning process for a child with a learning disability in the home school environment as it was perceived by the same persons.

Key Concepts

Home Schooling

Home schooling is a legal form of schooling in all states and provinces, with varying degrees of governmental regulatory control in each location. The act of home schooling involves a parent or parents teaching their children in the home and the participation in educational activities outside of the home, as organized by the family (Ray, 1999; Medlin, 2000; Rivero, 2008). Home schoolers are a diverse group of people

representing a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, education levels and style, and religious and philosophical values (Davies & Aurini, 2003). However, some generalizations can be made about the 'typical' home schooling family. Generally, most come from two-parent families. Both parents are usually involved in the education of their children, but the mother is the primary teacher in 90% of the families (Ray & Wartes, 1994). Some families practice a very relaxed and flexible form of home schooling called 'unschooling', while some families have very structured learning environments that are similar to a conventional school. Generally, though, most families practice an individualized or customized program that falls somewhere between the two extremes of style (Lines, 1994; Ray, 1999). Over 90% of home schoolers are Caucasian in terms of racial/ethnic background, although the numbers of other racial and cultural groups is rapidly increasing (McDowell, Sanchez, & Jones, 2000). The typical family does not just school at home. Actually, there are a large number of home school cooperatives and support groups that meet regularly throughout North America. Families use these to coordinate activities (academic and non-academic), social events, and parent education such as seminars and conferences. Families also use community resources such as the library, athletic facilities, and cultural centres to support their efforts (Arai, 2000; Davies & Aurini, 2003; Medlin, 2000). Almost all home schooled children participate in a variety of activities outside of the home (Gathercole, 2007).

Individualization in Education

Individualization in the learning process can be defined as the method by which an education program is individualized or customized for a student (Davies & Aurini, 2003). Individual programs can involve individual direct instruction that deals with the

specific academic, behavioural, social, or physical needs of a student (Brownell, Ross, Colon, & McCallum, 2005; Foorman & Torgeson, 2001). Individualized education can mean one-on-one, tutorial type instruction. Individualized education might mean the establishment of a curriculum that is specifically advantageous for the student (Jones, Wilson, & Bhojwani, 1997; Lynch & Irvine, 2009). It might mean developing methods that facilitate the learning process of that individual child (Fredrickson, Jones, & Lang, 2010). It also involves the amount of time that a child receives in explicit and intensive instruction or the amount of time that a student is academically engaged in his/her specific learning process (Duvall et al., 1997; Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Wasik & Slavin, 1993). It can also involve a program that follows the interests and passions of a specific student (Vaughn, Erlbaum, & Boardman, 2001). In summary, individualization involves all that which defines an individual program for the individual student. As Littky and Allen (1999) state, “schools that are serious about fulfilling every student’s promise must develop structures and relationships that nurture the strengths and energies of each student ... truly individualized learning requires reorganizing schools to start with the student, not the subject matter” (p. 25).

Social Inclusion

Social inclusion can be defined as the level of inclusion that occurs for an individual in social environments. There are three types of inclusion in classrooms and other venues, for individuals with disabilities: social, academic, and physical inclusion. Social inclusion is only one aspect of inclusion but it is one of the more difficult ones to address (Freeman, Stoch, Chan, & Hutchinson, 2004; Lynch & Irvine, 2009). Social inclusion is a perceived reality by all people involved, for example, students, parents,

teachers, and peers (Hutchinson, Freeman, & Steiner Bell, 2002; Pearl & Donahue, 2004; Vaughn et al., 2001). The perception is that an individual is involved, included, and a part of the social fabric of a given environment (Thomas & Loxley, 2001). As Hutchinson (2002) states, “inclusion suggests that they [people with exceptionalities] be ensured full social, educational, and economic participation in society and on their own terms as much as possible” (p. 17). A number of researchers have shown that children with LD struggle to be included socially in their environments (Hutchinson, Freeman, & Steiner Bell, 2002; Kavale & Forness, 1996; Pearl & Donahue, 2004; Vaughn et al., 2001).

Rationale

Emotions run high in educational environments when the needs of children with disabilities are discussed. This emotional reaction is understandable because these children represent one of the more vulnerable populations in our school environments and need to be treated with extra care (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bowers, 1996; Hutchinson, 2002; Martinez & Humphreys, 2006). The level of social inclusion and the amount of individualized instruction that should be available for students with learning disabilities is of significant concern for many educators. Even after the concerns are identified by authors within education, it is often difficult for educators to agree on an appropriate model of education that works for these students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; Martinez & Humphreys, 2006; Sapon-Shevin, 1996; Zigmond & Baker, 1996). An examination of different educational models is needed to understand how students can have a healthy level of social inclusion within their schooling environments while, at the same time,

having their academic needs addressed, which often entail the necessity for an academically individualized program.

It is important to examine these models, the questions and concerns that they raise as well as their benefits to identify and understand the dynamics that are possible for students with learning disabilities. Since most students attend mainstream public schools, those environments have had the most attention (Carrington, 1999; Dowds & Hess, 1996; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; Hutchinson, 2002; Littky & Allen, 1999; Vaughn, Gersten, & Chard, 2000). However, it is also of much value to examine alternative educational settings to see what those environments have to offer students with special needs. “Researchers need to look closely at student outcomes in non-traditional settings to expand understanding of academic and social skills” (Ensign, 2000, p. 148), as “different stories and their settings can characterize different life experiences which are worth examining” (Donmeyer, 1997, p. 2). Rather than ignore such settings because their solutions lie in unique and individual circumstances, it is precisely that uniqueness that should be celebrated:

Maybe, what these ‘special’ schools demonstrate is that every school must have the power and the responsibility to select and design its own particulars and thus to surround all young people with powerful adults who are in a position to act on their behalf. (Meir, 1998, p. 359)

Home schooling is an environment that, although not practiced by a majority of the general population of students, is indeed a form of education that is the choice of many students and their families (Lines, 1994; Ray, 2004, Rudner, 1999). Many of these families are home schooling children with learning disabilities (Duffey, 2002; Duvall, Delquadri, & Ward, 2004; Ensign, 2000), and it is useful to understand what qualities and characteristics of this environment are successful for students who have learning

disabilities. In document searches of home school materials targeting the families who home school (home schooling books, magazines, websites, parent chat groups, conference/seminar materials), the possibilities of individualized learning and social inclusion are frequently highlighted as attributes within the home school environment. Unfortunately, there is a limited body of research on home schooling in general and an even smaller offering of academic articles on students who home school with learning disabilities (Duvall et al., 2004; Medlin, 2000; Ray, 1999, 2000). This thesis, then, is another ‘rung in the ladder’ of academic research that examines alternative schooling, home schooling, and, most importantly, how home schooling is practiced and valued by three students who have learning disabilities and the families who home school them.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

It is important to identify critical issues for children with learning disabilities within schooling environments. The social and academic issues of these children present a dynamic and complicated scenario for educators to address. There are no easy answers, regardless of the school environment (Duvall, 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; Leach & Duffy, 2009; Pearl & Donahue, 2004), but different views and approaches to social and academic challenges have been discussed in the academic literature.

This literature review examines three areas of research. The first section discusses the challenges and opportunities for social engagement that are part of the social life of children with learning disabilities. Students with learning disabilities display complex social needs. What are these needs and how can these needs be met? The second section reviews the literature to examine the academic needs of students with learning disabilities. The tension between the need for individualized instruction and the need to address the learning of multiple students within the classroom setting is crucial to this understanding. How is this tension dealt with in different settings and within different models? What conditions are necessary for academic success? Finally, the literature on home schooling is examined to understand how academic and social needs are met for students who are educated within this model. This section includes the limited research available on children with learning disabilities who home school.

A Social Life for Students with Learning Disabilities: Challenges and Opportunities

Children with learning disabilities (LD) struggle to be included socially across contexts (Estell et al., 2008; Hutchinson, Freeman, & Berg, 2004; Pearl & Donahue, 2004; Vaughn et al., 2001; Wiener, 2002) with 75% of children with LD displaying social skill deficits (Kavale & Forness, 1996). Additionally, these children tend to have diminished social status and increased feelings of loneliness and alienation (Frederickson & Furnham, 2004; Pavri & Luftig, 2000) and display on average half as many positive social interactions as their regular peers (Roberts, Pratt, & Leach, 1991).

Most children with learning disabilities spend a considerable amount of time in the school environment where children are usually organized within larger peer groups. Unfortunately, for children with LD, school is not always a positive experience:

For some adolescents, school is not a warm and friendly place. Some students, who are unsuccessful academically and who receive insufficient attention from peers and adults, start to act as though they were quietly invisible. Others, in the same situation, will act out until they receive attention.
(Testerman, 1996, p. 364)

Social Cognition in Children with Learning Disabilities

Deficits in cognitive areas that cause problems in academic areas are just as likely to cause problems in non-academic areas as well (Kavale & Forness, 1996; Meadan & Hall, 2004). Children with learning disabilities are fundamentally challenged in the area of social cognition (Elias, 2004; Hutchinson et al., 2004; Pavri & Luftig, 2000). As children with disabilities have been largely included in classroom settings, there has sometimes been the assumption that they will make the desired social connections. However, according to Roberts, Pratt, and Leach (1991), “the mere placement of these

students within a regular school context does not automatically result in increase social interactions between students with disabilities and those without” (p. 212).

Hutchinson, Freeman, and Berg (2004) described social cognition as one aspect of the social competence puzzle. They defined social cognition as having to do with the processing of social information, both verbal and non-verbal. In other words, people continuously interpret verbal and non-verbal clues as they are involved in social interactions. Social cognition is the process whereby social perception and social problem solving is used as people interact with others. The researchers used a variety of studies to support their ideas on the challenges of social cognition for children with LD. For example, various researchers (Axlerod, 1982; Jarvis & Justice, 1992) have demonstrated that children with LD are significantly lower in non-verbal social perception. Bryan et al. (1989) showed that adolescents with LD were more likely to use antisocial behaviour when pressured to conform than adolescents without LD. Pearl and Bryan (1994) similarly found that adolescents with LD were more likely to make poor social decisions. Hutchinson, Freeman, and Berg felt that this research shows unequivocally that children with LD face significant challenges due to deficits in social cognition.

One of the problems with some studies in the literature is that the researchers tend to clump children with learning disabilities into one homogeneous group. Doing so is a problem because learning disabilities are far from homogeneous. Some researchers are beginning to address this challenge. For example, in a study by Martinez (2006), the purpose was to examine the role of social support on school adjustment in middle school adolescents with LD. Instead of grouping all the students with LD, the author divided these students into a group that had multiple LD and those who had single LD (i.e.,

learning disability in a single area like reading). This subdivision proved useful as there were, indeed, significant differences between the two types of groups. Other studies have attempted to subdivide groups of children by which area that their learning disability is most pronounced (Tur-Kaspa, 2002). For example, some studies have shown a correlation between mathematical deficits and the spatial and problem solving skills necessary for competent social cognition (Semrud-Clikeman & Hynd, 1990; Tur-Kaspa, 2002). Other studies have attempted to subdivide students who have LD and those who have co-morbidity of LD and another diagnosis such as ADHD or depression (Wiener, 2002). Finally, some researchers have used highly individualized research through case studies to access very rich and in-depth information as a means of understanding the social competence and social cognition challenges of children with LD (Hutchinson et al., 2002). That approach was used in the current study.

Peer Status, Friendship, and Social Networks

Studies on social cognition represent only a small proportion of those conducted on the social aspects of learning disabilities. A number of studies on the social dimension of learning disabilities have focused on the importance of peer status (Estell et al., 2008; Kavale & Forness, 1996; Pearl & Donahue, 2004). These studies have used sociometric methods to analyze peer relationships in children with learning disabilities. For example, in 1974 (a, b), Tanis Bryan did two foundational studies in this field, examining the popularity of children with LD in their social environments. She reported that children with LD placed in mainstream schooling were significantly less popular with their peers than children without LD. Additionally, these children's communication patterns with their non-LD peers were marked with higher levels of hostility. Bryan's studies led to a

multitude of articles that reaffirmed her original findings that, as a group, children with LD have lower status than their peers (Gresham & MacMillan, 1997; Kavale & Forness, 1996; Pearl & Bay, 1999; Wiener, 2002).

Friendship makes a valuable contribution to the social lives of all people. For instance, children with friends score higher on self-concept and on general self-worth than children without friends (Vaughn et al., 2001). Friendship can give people higher levels of self-validation and self-clarification (Hutchinson, Freeman, & Steiner Bell, 2004). Friendship is also recognized as an important factor in resilience, which is particularly important in high risk groups such as children with LD (Hutchinson et al., 2004; Wiener, 2002). Social support is important to adjustment in social settings, and friendship can serve as a “positive influence on children in negative environments” (Wenz-Gross & Siperstein, 1997, p. 184). “Adolescents need at least one supportive peer (i.e., dependable, understanding, and accepting) who is a trustworthy confidant in order to deal with their preoccupying concerns” (Hutchinson et al., 2004, p. 434).

Vaughn and Elbaum (1999) examined the friendships of 4000 children in elementary school including 900 children who had LD. Almost 96% of the children with LD stated that they had at least one best friend. Sixty-seven percent of the children stated that they had 6 or more best friends. Similar results have been found in Wiener’s (2002) study where she compared 232 children who had LD with 115 children who did not have LD in two suburban, middle school environments (Grade 4-8) in Toronto, Canada. She noted that, although self-reported variables, such as low self-esteem, low social self-concept, and high levels of loneliness were common in the LD group, there was a protective factor through friendship. Having even one good friend that was available to

share their school lives made a significant contribution to the health of the social lives of children with LD in mainstream schooling. Even having a close friend out-of-school is a protective factor (Wiener & Sunohara, 1998). For students with LD, having at least one good friendship is a positive predictor of general self-worth and self-perception of social status (Bear, Juvoven, & McInerney, 1993; Vaughn et al., 2001). Friendship is critical to the adolescent population and, although it may be difficult for adolescents with LD to develop friendships, it is central to their ability to develop social competence, particularly among the female population where the intimate and supportive nature of female relationships is considered a high priority (Hutchinson et al., 2004).

Social networks are another factor in the social lives of children with learning disabilities. Social networks do not just include intimate friendships but encompass all the children and adults with whom a person is affiliated. Social networks may involve family, friends linked through outside activities, peers in a classroom, or other adults in the child's life. Within the school environment, social networks can consist of smaller or larger clusters of peers to which students adhere. Often these clusters have status and identity attached to them so an examination of the social networks of children within these clusters is useful (Martinez, 2006; Vaughn et al., 2001; Wenz-Gross & Siperstein, 1997). Feeling support from a social network of some sort is vitally important to the healthy psychosocial adjustment of all people (Martinez, 2006).

In a study by Farmer and Farmer (1996), the social networks of 11 students were used to explore this area of social inclusion. Although the study was small, all of the students were included in some form of social network within the school environment. What was more telling was the nature of the social networks. The peer clusters of which

the students with LD were a part were, overall, less positive in nature. The children with disabilities were overrepresented in anti-social groups (e.g., problem behaviours) and underrepresented in pro-social groups. As well, these children often played a marginal/secondary role within these groups.

These findings were echoed in other studies. Estell and colleagues (2008) conducted a longitudinal study over the course of three years and noted that, while students with LD were part of classroom social groups, they remained consistently lower in social status compared to their typically functioning peers. These students scored lower in best friend nominations, in peer popularity, and much lower in social preference. While the students appeared to be physically included, the actual nature of their social involvement was more complex than immediately apparent. In other studies (e.g., Fleming, Cook, & Stone, 2002; Frederickson & Furnham, 2004; Pearl & Donahue, 2004), children with LD did not always fit into a group at all, were continuously rejected, or when they did manage to 'fit-in,' they were often negatively influenced by the poor behaviour of the group. As stated by Pearl and Donahue (2004), "these findings suggest that for some students with learning disabilities, making connections with peers may not necessarily be the positive development that it is often assumed to be" (p. 140).

Other non-peer networks can be important for people with LD. In a retrospective study by Freeman, Stoch, Chan, and Hutchinson (2004) on academic resilience, the authors interviewed adults with LD about their past high school experiences to examine what factors kept these adults in school or pushed them out of school. These adults reported that, during high school, it was significant adults, both within school and outside of school, who played a prominent role in keeping them at school or pushing them out. In

a study by Roberts et al. (1991), children with disabilities tended to seek out and initiate contact with adults more frequently than did children without disabilities.

The Role of Interest

Interest may be a particularly critical element for social competence. Vaughn et al. (2001) claimed that, “given that individuals are more likely to befriend those with whom they have something in common, students with LD may have few friends in classes where their academic weaknesses set them apart; outside of the classroom, these same students may excel in other areas, developing reciprocal friendships” (p. 58). Friendships are often formed around common interests and activities (Hutchinson et al., 2004). “Some students with strong out-of-school interests may focus their social lives on others who share their enthusiasm” (Pearl & Donahue, 2004, p. 156). There is therefore much potential for children with LD to form friendships in this manner. Interest and commonalities between students may foster links to create social inclusion (Farmer & Farmer, 1996; Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 1996). In the study by Freeman et al. (2004), adults with LD felt that interests shared with their peers played a strong role in giving them resilience against the challenges of LD. “Students who found structured outlets for expressing their genuine interests, whether inside or outside of school, were more likely to complete school in the traditional fashion” (p. 16).

In a series of case studies (Hutchinson et al., 2002, 2004; Levesque, 1997; Stoch, 2000), the role of interest has been examined as one of the significant factors behind the social lives of adolescents with learning disabilities. Case studies allow the researcher to delve into the richness and complexity of the individual situation and, within every case, interest played a significant role in the social complexities of the person’s life. Murtaugh

(1988) also examined the role of nonacademic activities in the lives of high school students through a series of case studies. Interest, in the form of nonacademic activities, played a crucial role in the lives of many students with LD. However, some students had highly unrealistic expectations of where these interests could lead them in that some students' aspirations matched their talent and effort while others' did not. Murtaugh's focus, unlike the discussed case studies, appeared to be more on the future potential and benefits of the activities for these students and perhaps less on the role that the activities played in their current lives.

The Role of Context

The environment is the 'stage,' the 'backdrop,' the environmental context in which children must function. Given the many factors that affect social inclusion for children with learning disabilities, placement decisions are complicated if the social as well as the academic needs of the student must be met appropriately (Hutchinson et al., 2004; Martinez, 2006; Vaughn et al., 2001; Wiener, 2002).

Wiener (2002) discussed the impact of special education placement. For the 117 students with LD in the study, there were a number of different placement options represented: self-contained classes, in-class support (never left the classroom), and resource room attendance. Children who received in-class support and those who left for 30-90 minutes a day for assistance had no differences in levels of peer acceptance and in quality of friendships. On the other hand, those children who were in self-contained classrooms did report lower levels of friendship and increased levels of conflict with their peers. However, in a study by Vaughn and Klingner (1998), children found it easier to

function in the smaller, more intimate setting of the resource classroom and harder to function in larger, inclusive classrooms.

The case study of Zak (Stoch, 2000) demonstrates the complexities of the role of context. Stoch observed this boy in three different settings: at home, at school, and at camp. In these different settings, he was “almost a different person.” In the camp setting, he was at his most comfortable where he thrived socially and was considered a leader. In school, however, he had trouble relating to his peers and often used negative behaviour. It is this level of comfort, the security of the person in the environment, that makes the type of placement acceptable to a person or not. Perhaps, alternative style placements, such as multi-age classrooms, home schooling, and interest-led or individualized settings, would be worth researching to understand the possibilities and challenges of social inclusion in those environments.

An Academic Life for Students with Learning Disabilities: Challenges and Opportunities

There is no disagreement that all students, including those with learning disabilities, should be offered the most effective instruction possible. There are, however, diverse opinions among educators about the nature of effective instruction. It would be gratifying if empirical research played a bigger role in directing educational practice, but, frequently, beliefs and convictions play more influential roles. (Jones, Wilson, & Bhojwani, 1997, p. 158)

The inclusion movement has done much to include children with disabilities in the normal, everyday sphere of our schools, a huge step forward for all people in society including those with disabilities. In the past, children with disabilities were often segregated, permanently, with little hope for advancement into regular classrooms, thus being denied the opportunity to be a part of the society into which they were born

(Carrington, 1999). As well, for so-called 'regular' children, there was little opportunity to relate to any child who might not fit society's and schools' standards of 'normal.' This polarization of 'regular' and 'irregular' children within schools was far from a healthy situation (Carrington, 1999; Sapon-Shevin, 1996). Inclusion has therefore done much to allow a whole generation of children growing up and the teachers who educate them, to experience different students, with differing needs on a continuum, within regular education, an important advance for our schools and our society (Andrews & Lupart, 2000; Hutchinson, 2002; Martinez-Humphreys, 2006; Sapon-Shevin, 1996).

However, there is a significant problem in our schools: students with learning disabilities may not be learning up to their full potential in regular classrooms (Elbaum, Hughes, Moody, & Vaughn, 2000; Lynch & Irvine, 2009; Vaughn, Elbaum, Schumm, & Hughes, 1998; Zigmond, Kloo, & Volonino, 2009). Increasingly, there is a call to do better for these students, particularly the ones with high-incidence disabilities such as learning disabilities (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010; Graham & Bellert, 2004; McLeskey & Wladron, 2011; Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003; Torgeson et al., 2001). Although we have included them physically in the classroom, they may not really be included socially and academically: "without a needs-based focus in educational programme planning, 'inclusion' is nothing more than another label and students will continue to experience exclusion when placed in the regular classroom" (Lynch & Irvine, 2009, p. 846).

The Need for Explicit, Intensive, and Supportive Instruction: A Call for Individualized Instruction

“With high quality instruction, students will acquire skills in less time and make more adaptive generalizations than they would with lower quality instruction” (Jones et al., 1997, p. 152). Higher quality instruction for children with learning disabilities (LD) needs a specific style of instruction that is different from that for children without learning disabilities. Children with LD require instruction that contains the following three basic components: 1) the instruction has to be very explicit, 2) it has to be more intensive, and 3) it must be supportive (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Graham & Bellert, 2004; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011).

Children who have LD often do not just ‘get it’ after reasonable exposure to a given set of skills. For example, Torgeson and colleagues (2001) did a thorough study of reading interventions developed for 60 children with severe reading disabilities. The children were given instruction using various levels of explicit attention to detail. The children were instructed for over 67 hours during an 8-week period. Although all children receiving intervention improved, only the most explicit interventions made a significant difference in the reading skills of young children with LD. The same type of explicit instruction is invaluable in teaching math skills as well (Jones et al., 1997; Montague, 2008).

The second important component of instruction for students with LD is that it must be intensive. Children at risk for reading, writing, or mathematical failure learn more slowly and require more repetition than children without LD (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Graham & Bellert, 2004; Wise et al., 1999). Intensive

instruction requires much time, creativity, and energy from the teacher, but it is time well spent.

Third, instruction for children with LD must be more supportive emotionally and cognitively (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Graham et al, 2004; Larkin & Ellis, 2004).

Children at risk academically need to receive emotional support in the form of feedback, encouragement, and positive reinforcement. The emotional challenges of a struggling learner are extensive (Brownell, Bishop, & Gersten, 2009; Pavri & Luftig, 2000).

Cognitive support is also important through the method of ‘scaffolded’ instruction.

Scaffolding involves the careful sequencing of skills so that the student is scaffolded to reach for the next level. Scaffolding can be done in a larger group setting but to truly address the unique needs of a child with learning disabilities, it is more easily done in a small group or one-on-one (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Larkin & Ellis, 2004).

There are, of course, other qualities of instruction that are important for children with LD but explicit, intense, and supportive components are considered to be the main components of instruction for academic success. These three main components can be taught in a regular classroom setting, but they are so much more easily addressed in small group formats or in one-to-one settings (Elbaum et al., 2000; Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Slavin & Karweit, 1985). “While the instructional adaptations that meet the needs of students with learning disabilities may benefit others in a regular classroom setting, the dilemma of providing the intensity of instruction required by this population remains” (Graham & Bellert, 2004, p. 273).

Zigmond and Baker (1996) conducted a comprehensive study of three separate elementary schools with children from a variety of socio-economic, racial, and

geographic backgrounds. They used a qualitative methodology, observing and interviewing extensively in all three schools. Although they felt that there were many social and community benefits for these children who were fully part of the fabric of their classrooms, they observed that the academic needs of these children were not being met properly.

We saw almost no attempts to provide individual instruction, in which a student was explicitly taught skills or concepts that had been identified as outside her or his current repertoire yet needed for coping with the mainstream curriculum. No one had time for it. (p. 31)

Many teachers had gone to considerable lengths to accommodate these children within the regular classroom, using the best practices that were often outlined in inclusive education literature. However, when interviewed, they felt that they were not addressing the significant needs of these children. They talked of trying to accommodate rather than remediate the necessary skills that these children needed: “We’re not teaching them how to read. I think that we are just doing total accommodation. No one has time to teach these kids [fifth graders] how to read back to at their second grade level” (p. 31).

Based on their 2-year study of students reintegrating into mainstream schooling, Fuchs, Roberts, Fuchs, and Bowers (1996) stated that 30% of children with disabilities typically failed to respond to the best practices of inclusive education (when best practices were in place); however, realistically, these best practices were hard to implement. To address all these needs, classes needed to be smaller, reduced to 13-17 students, while typically classes ranged from 25 to 45 students. As well, many teachers did not have the skill level to implement all the best practices recommended by inclusive researchers. Teachers tended to instruct the same lesson and materials to all students.

In other studies (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007; see also Zigmond et al., 2009), researchers have examined the role of co-teachers (for special education placements) in the inclusive classroom to see if they are an effective tool for assisting in the learning process of students with LD. The co-teachers were often seen ‘helping’ the students with a comment here and there, or they would be used to sub-divide the classroom into two equal groups with a variety of students. Unfortunately, they were rarely able to target the specific challenges of the students who needed their help most. Their own skills were not fully utilized to address the students with LD and rarely were they able to lead their heterogeneous group with tools that would be specifically focused on the children with special needs. In the end, although they were hired to address the needs of students with LD within the inclusive setting, they were still unable to focus their attention on this high needs group.

The main issue that challenges these students appears to be academic engaged time (AET). AET is a critical determiner of academic achievement in students with many researchers considering increases in academic engaged time to be vital for children with learning disabilities due to its strong and positive correlation with their achievement (Delquadri et al., 1986; Duvall et al., 1997, 2004; Gettinger & Seibert, 2002; Greenwood et al., 1984; Thurston & Dasta, 1990). Certain behaviours manifest higher levels of AET, such as increased opportunities to respond to instruction through writing, speaking, physical activity, reading aloud, and reading silently; generally being involved or engaged in the academic material.

In regular classroom settings, students, particularly those with learning disabilities, experience limited academic engaged time (Brownell et al., 2009; DuPaul &

Hennington, 1993; Duvall, 1997, 2004; Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Gettinger & Seibert, 2002). A student could be physically present in the classroom, physically included in an activity, even a sub-group within the classroom, and still not be academically engaged in the current activity. Much of the problem for increasing academic engaged time within the classroom stems from the fact that students, particularly those with learning disabilities, need to be highly encouraged to respond academically. They need to be given many opportunities to respond and, when responses are appropriate for the task, they need to be given much positive feedback from their teachers so that academic response continues (Duvall, 2005; Duvall et al., 2004; Gettinger & Seibert, 2002; Thurlow, Ysseldyke, Wotruba, & Algozzine, 1993). As a result, one of the most significant factors in levels of academic engaged time is the student-teacher ratio. In general, when student-teacher ratios are lower, the levels of AET are higher (Duvall, 2005; Thurlow et al., 1993). If a teacher is able to focus more time on a particular student, then that student is given more opportunities to respond academically. In turn, the teacher is able to give positive feedback, which encourages more response so that a student will have increased academic gains through higher levels of academic engaged time.

To further this argument, Vaughn, Gersten, and Chard (2000) did a meta-analysis that found interventions focused on supportive, explicit, and intense instruction styles, in individual tutoring or small group settings, provided the most academic success for student with learning disabilities. It is at the intersection of both quality teaching components and of smaller group or individual settings where opportunities for increased academic engaged time are provided and the best learning environment occurs for students with learning disabilities. Individualized instruction is the key.

Individualized Instruction in Action: Tutoring and Small Groups

There are two main methods of delivering individualized instruction: one is through various forms of tutoring and the other is through the small group format. Tutoring can take the form of teacher tutoring, parent tutoring, and peer tutoring. Small group typically consists of groups of 3-5 students. A number of researchers have examined these two methods to explore the value and efficacy of tutorial and small group programming as a way to deliver explicit, intensive, and supportive instruction for students with learning disabilities. Some are more supportive of one-on-one (tutorial) arrangements (Butler, Elaschuk, & Poole, 2000; Elbaum et al., 2000; Erion, 2006), while some are more supportive of small groups (Slavin & Karweit, 1985; Vaughn et al., 2003; Wise et al., 1999). Others are supportive of both styles of individualized instruction (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). Either way, these researchers' conclusions are reflected in the following statement:

Findings from evidence-based research show dramatic reductions in the incidence of reading failure when explicit instruction is provided by the classroom teacher. To address the needs of children most at risk of reading failure, the same instructional components are relevant but they need to be made explicit and comprehensive, more intensive, and more supportive in small-group and one-on-one. (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001. p. 203)

Teacher tutoring was discussed extensively in a group of four studies by Butler et al. (2000). The authors analyzed, through qualitative methodology, the use of strategic content learning (SCL) on 62 students attending university or college. All students had learning disabilities, as determined by previous psycho-educational assessments, and all were receiving supplementary help at their college/university through teacher tutoring. The authors of the studies observed and interviewed, tested and analyzed the data to determine if SCL could be implemented as a successful model of instruction through the

use of tutoring or small group instruction. The results were outlined through a series of case study reports. Unfortunately, the results from all 62 students were not reported, which would have been interesting. The case reports were extensive and revealing and, presumably representative, but some sort of categorical and thematic reporting of the other students would have contributed significantly to the study. However, in all cases discussed, the students showed substantial gains in their ability to strategize and implement these strategies for use in their education. It was clear that the students had very explicit discussions with their tutors about strategizing information. It was also certain that the sessions provided intensive periods of instruction that helped the students work through a variety of assignments. The students found the sessions supportive cognitively because their instructors had taken a step-by-step approach to their learning sessions. They also derived benefits emotionally as they were supported for their efforts and encouraged.

Elbaum et al. (2000) carried out a meta-analysis to determine if one-on-one teacher/or paraprofessional-led tutoring was as effective as it was purported to be. They analyzed 31 studies on teacher-led tutoring for reading remediation. A number of the studies analyzed data from programs that were implemented widely in the school system. Other programs that were less well known and less formal were also analyzed. The results were overwhelmingly in support of one-on-one tutoring. Although a few studies did not show significant differences between small groups and one-on-one tutoring, the vast majority did indeed support the use of tutoring. Elbaum and colleagues summed up the results by saying,

The findings of this meta-analysis support the argument that well-designed, reliably implemented, one-to-one interventions can make a significant

contribution to improved reading outcomes for many students whose poor reading skills place them at risk for academic failure. (p. 617)

Erion (2006) performed a meta-analysis that examined the effectiveness of parent tutoring in 37 studies across grade level, across various skill areas (math, reading, spelling), and with various parent teaching features (modelling, supervised practice, written instructions, consultation, etc.). The results were overwhelmingly in support of parent tutoring as an effective means of improving the academic skills of children. Compared to other types of interventions, parent tutoring was considered particularly effective, especially in the areas of reading, math, and spelling. In another study on parent tutoring, Dowds and Hess (1996) examined the effects of parent tutoring on a child with learning disabilities in a 3-year longitudinal case study. The program was established as a result of the initial evaluation and was organized in consultation with the special education teacher and the parent. Parent tutoring of this student was definitely a significant part of this student's academic achievement.

Peer tutoring has also been discussed in a number of studies as a useful tool for individualized instruction within the classroom (Elbaum et al., 2000; Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Johnson, 1999; Jones et al., 1997). It can be used in a couple of different ways, either preplanned or spontaneous (Jones et al., 1997). Both forms of peer tutoring have been widely encouraged in inclusive educational literature. In a study by Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes, and Simmons (1997), the authors were able to use peer tutoring in a highly successful manner. Peer assistance was effective because it delivered instruction in a timely manner, providing rapid feedback for these children. The only caution with peer tutoring, as implicated in the article by Zigmond and Baker (1996), is that it cannot

replace the expertise of adult-led instruction. Peer tutoring must only be used as a form of assistance, not as a replacement for the skills of the teacher.

Similarly, a number of studies have supported the use of small, teacher-led groups to provide the instruction needed for students with LD. The National Reading Panel (2000), under a congressional charge, performed a meta-analysis to see what type of instructional practice would be of most benefit to children in Kindergarten and Grade 1. The NRP report demonstrated that phonics and phonemic awareness exercises were of most benefit particularly when instructed to small groups of children.

Wise, Ring, and Olson (1999) developed three types of interventions for 122 second to fifth grade students with reading disabilities to enable increased phonological awareness after 40 hours of training. Much to their surprise, the effect between the different interventions had little significance, but all three interventions had significant effects compared to the control group. The control group was a regular classroom while all the interventions were performed within small, instructor-led groups. The small groups were thus a significant part of the success of the interventions.

Home Schooling: Meeting the Social and Academic Challenges of Students with Learning Disabilities

Educating children with learning disabilities is a challenge but one that must be met to serve our responsibility as a society to educate all children. Individualized instruction and, with it, the opportunities for explicit, intensive, and supportive instruction are essential for children with learning disabilities. On the other hand, educating these children in regular classrooms presents huge challenges for teacher and

student. As well, the social needs of students with learning disabilities are frequently not met in regular school environments, despite the wholehearted attempts of educators to build classroom environments that include all students. We want all children to be included in their communities, but we also must strive to meet their unique needs for education. This tension must be resolved to properly educate children with LD. The tension could be lessened through a different model of education, with empirically supported research.

Home schooling is a significant departure from the norms in our society. In fact, one author somewhat humorously wrote, “to the oft-cited triumvirate of what is ineluctable in life – birth, death, and taxes – we Americans are prone to add an unspoken fourth: school” (Guterson, 1992. p. 1). If home schooling parents dare to take their children out during school hours, the invariable question from friendly community members will be, “why aren’t they in school?” When the response is that, “they home school,” the eyebrows will go up and a multitude of reactions will surface, ranging from delight, to curiosity, to downright disgust (Guterson, 1992; Ray, 1999). As a society, we are often uncomfortable with anything that stretches beyond the norm but what is really at stake for children who home school, including those who have learning disabilities, is the health of the educational environment that their parents have chosen for them.

Davies and Aurini (2003) interviewed 75 home schooling families within Ontario, Canada and described the common denominator among all home schooling families, regardless of pedagogical or ideological background, was a new demand for choice as a way to depart from the larger, one best system of public school boards. The families, above all, indicated that their desire for a highly individualistic and customized education

was simply another alternative (among other alternatives such as charter schools and private schools). Their desire for this type of education was framed in the language of rights: the right to choose that which was best for their family and its unique needs.

Arai (2000) echoed the observations of Davies and Aurini, with the following statement about Canadian home schoolers: “Most families that were interviewed felt that the overall environment of schools was detrimental to their children’s well-being. When pressed about specific aspects of this harmful environment, many parents interviewed listed a mixture of ideological and pedagogical principles” (p. 210). Arai interviewed 23 families living in Ontario and British Columbia. The parents in these interviews were seeking an education for their children customized to their needs, whatever those needs might be. Some of those needs were of a more ideological nature but, frequently, the needs were more pedagogical in origin. Parents stated that large class sizes, poor academic standards, lack of individual attention, and poor socialization in the regular school were all reasons that they had chosen to home school.

Parents who home school are clearly calling for a more individualized and customized education for their children, an education that reflects the needs of the children and the family. For example, Rivero (2008) argues, “perhaps most important, each home schooled child – regardless of labels or diagnoses – can be given an education tailored to his or her needs” (p. 42). Knowles et al. (1994) also stress that parents seek home schooling as an alternative to “institutionalized education” to meet the unique needs of their children. What all these researchers contend is that home schooling is another choice in the offerings of education such as private schools, charter schools, and alternative schools (e.g., Montessori, Waldorf). Parents see their home schooling as a

right to provide education for their children who have special needs, whether that is giftedness, learning disabilities, or simply the unique learning styles seen in all schooled children. Public education is seen, by home schooling parents, as a form of mass education, which cannot possibly meet the multiple demands of children in an effective manner (Arai, 2000; Davies & Aurini, 2003; Rivero, 2008; Knowles et al., 1994), including both their social and academic needs.

Meeting Social Needs through Home Schooling

“But what about socialization?” is the most often asked question of home schoolers. Most home schoolers, as well as researchers, respond by asking: “What do you mean by socialization?” (Kelley, 1991; McDowell, 2004; Medlin, 2000; Ray, 1999). Socialization can be defined as “the process whereby people acquire the rules and behavior systems of beliefs and attitudes that equip a person to function effectively as a member of a particular society” (Durkin, 1995, p. 614).

A number of studies, some of them involving very large sample numbers, have examined the participation of home schooled children in outside (the home) activities. This research has concluded that these children are active in various extra-curricular activities (Gathercole, 2007; Kelley, 1991; McDowell, 2004; Rivero, 2008; Rudner, 1998). In Canada, Ray (1994) did a survey of 1,485 home schooled children to get a picture of their social lives. He found that they were involved in a wide variety of activities with a variety of individuals from peers to adults outside of their homes. On average, these children spent 12 hours per week with non-sibling children. Sixty per cent (60%) of them were regularly involved in group sports, 82% in Sunday school, 48% in music classes, and 93% in play activities outside of their family. As well, 45% of these

children took academic classes with other students outside of the home. Rudner (1998) also examined social activities in his study in the U.S., involving a large sample size (20,760 students), reaching similar conclusions. Home schooling parents tend to encourage their children to participate in various activities and actively seek out such opportunities for their children (Gathercole, 2007), although they may feel that there is extra effort required on their part to keep an acceptable level of social contact for their children (Medlin, 2000).

Other studies examined the nature of the social contacts that these children had on a regular basis. Chatham-Carpenter (1994) found that home schoolers had contact with 49 different people in a month's time, whereas public school students typically had contact with 56 different people; however, there were significant differences in quality. The home schooled children met with a wider variety of ages, while the schooled children met with a higher percentage of peers. Both groups had a similar number of close friends (3 to 5) even though their social networks looked somewhat different (in terms of age variation). While home schooled children do not appear to be socially isolated, more research needs to be done to determine the effects, either negative or positive, of the differences between socialization dominated by peers versus socialization by mixed-age groups, including peers. As Medlin (2000) suggests, "flexible schedule and more efficient use of time home schooling affords may allow home schooled children to participate in more extra-curricular activities than children attending conventional schools" (p. 113).

Still other research has examined the nature of self-concept and how that is related to the healthy psychological development of the children. For example, a study by

Kelly (1991) compared 67 home schooled children with 67 school-aged children using the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (PHSCS). She found that 50% of the home schooled children were at or above the 80th percentile on the PHSCS global scale. In other studies (Kitchen, 1991; Medlin, 1994, 2000; Ray & Wartes, 1994; Shyers, 1992; Taylor, 1986), levels of self-concept for home schooled children have been either similar to or slightly higher than regularly schooled children. These differences may be the result of a supportive environment, respectful treatment, clearly defined limits, and low levels of anxiety within the home school context (Kelly).

Meeting Academic Needs through Home Schooling

“What about academic achievement?” is often second in rank to the question of socialization when home school parents are being queried (Arai, 2000; Ray, 1999; Ray & Wartes, 1994). However, it is an important question and one that has received some extensive investigation. In this area of research, the studies are usually divided along two basic patterns. The first type of study is an investigation of the levels of academic achievement along with the demographic patterns of home schoolers. These studies are primarily quantitative in nature. The other area of study has come from an attempt to investigate the relationships between the test scores and the various variables in the home school environment, such as self-concept, gender, levels of parent education, family income, and aptitude in relation to academic achievement.

Ray (1994, 1999, 2000) has done a variety of state, provincial, and national (Canadian and American) studies on academic achievement and home school demographics. For example, he did a nationwide study in the U.S. in 1997 that used a sample population of 5,200 children from 1,657 families. This population was comprised

of families that volunteered out of an initial mail-out request to over 5,000 families. The students (whose average age was 11) scored above the 80th percentile in all subject areas, specifically in the 82nd percentile for math total and in the 87th percentile for reading total. Although the results are impressive, one significant issue with this study is the fact that all participants (28% from the original mail-out) were voluntary and could presumably be from families who were more engaged, confident, and interested in the test results. Also, not all the tests were carried out by a neutral administrator as almost 44% of the tests were administered by parents, which could influence the results. While these facts were clearly stated by Ray in the introduction, they bear on the findings nevertheless.

Rudner (1998) investigated 20,760 students from 11,930 home school families, also on a voluntary basis. All the participants were required to take the same tests: the ITBS (Iowa Tests of Basic Skills) and the TAP (Tests of Achievement and Proficiency) and to fill out a questionnaire with all testing done by qualified test administrators. Again, the results were exceptionally high: the median scores for every subtest at every grade were typically in the 70th to the 80th percentile. Rudner acknowledges that the major limitation of this type of study, despite its size, is the fact that “home school students and their families are not a cross-section of the United States population - the act of home schooling distinguishes this group in terms of their exceptionally strong commitment to education and children” (p. 24).

While there are a variety of other smaller studies that have come up with similar findings with respect to academic achievement (Frost & Morris, 1988; Richman, Girten, & Snyder, 1990; Wartes, 1990), there have been other studies that showed somewhat less

flattering statistics for home schoolers. Rakestraw (1988) carried out a study of students in Grades 1 to 4 and found that they were below the national average in math and that reading scores ranged from between the 54th percentile and the 94th percentile. In 1985, the Washington State of Public Instruction conducted a study that found that home schoolers scored at the 62nd percentile in reading and the 53rd percentile in math. While these scores are not quite as high as those found by Ray (1997) and Rudner (1998), they could still be considered positive in terms of the academic health of the home school environment.

In the second category of studies on academic achievement, researchers have attempted to understand the relationship between test scores and other variables. For example, Medlin (1994) examined how three variables, self-concept, scholastic aptitude, and parent teaching practices, were predictors of academic achievement. His sample population was 36 home schooled children who came from a variety of home school backgrounds (e.g., highly structured schooling, semi-structured schooling to very relaxed, child-led schooling on a continuum). Scholastic aptitude was a high predictor of scholastic achievement; however, the achievement scores were significantly higher than the aptitude scores. Self-concept was high and was also a predictor of achievement. Less structure and less direct instruction were related to higher achievement scores.

Ray (2000) conducted an extensive study that analyzed 12 variables as they related to academic achievement in the home school environment. Seven of the variables did not explain any significant amounts of variance in the students' test scores. Five of the variables explained some statistically significant variance in the students' academic

scores: the father's education level, the mother's education level, years taught at home, the gender of the student, and the number of visits to libraries.

Home Schooling and Children with Learning Disabilities

The challenge of learning disabilities is taken quite seriously among home schoolers. In fact, a number of parents seem to choose to home school specifically to meet the special needs of their children (Duffey, 2002; Duvall et al., 1997, 2004; Ensign, 2000; Schetter, Lighthall, & McAfee, 2009). A number of books have been written specifically for parents who are home schooling children with disabilities (Field, 2005; Harnett, 2004; Hayes, 2002; Hensley, 1995; Herzog, 1994; Schetter et al., 2009). As well, there are several organizations, web sites, and articles that are written to help parents in their journey of home schooling a child with special needs (Hayes, 2002; Rivero, 2008). Unfortunately, despite the significant interest in learning disabilities within the home school community, there is not a similar amount of research within the academic community on children who home school and have learning disabilities. One of the few studies in this area was done by Duvall et al. (1997) who compared home schooled students with learning disabilities (LD) with traditionally schooled students with LD. Their quantitative methodology was well organized, with the purpose and results clearly linked, using pre- and post- standardized tests. The home schooled students made more progress on standardized tests than the public school students, and their consumer satisfaction was higher. The main problem was the study's sample size. Only four home schooled students were compared to a control group of four regularly schooled students, which makes it impossible to generalize. A similar study with a larger sample size is warranted.

In 2004, Duvall and colleagues did another preliminary investigation of the effectiveness of home school instructional environments for students with Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity-Disorder (ADHD). In this study, four students were selected from a pool of 33 students, and two pairs were formed that had very similar behavioural and academic profiles. Each pair consisted of one home schooled student and one public schooled student. The results were clearly in favour of the home school environment. The classroom ecology of the home school environment was considered to be equal and often better than the classroom environment for these students with ADHD. The students had considerably higher rates of “opportunity to respond,” consistent with higher levels of academic engaged time in learning (AET), which was 2.1 times higher in the home school environment. Since the student-teacher ratios in the home school environments were 10 times lower than the schooled environment, this result was consistent with the expected relationship between smaller student-teacher ratios and higher AET. The children in home schools received more individualized instruction than students in public schools (five-and-a-half times more). Furthermore, the higher AET in home schools resulted in less competing negative behaviours that are characteristic of children with ADHD. As for academic gains, the home schooled students made more gains in “three of four comparisons on both standardized test scores and rate-based measures” than the public schooled students (Duvall et al., 2004, p. 152).

Ensign (2000) conducted a qualitative, longitudinal study (9 years) with 100 exceptional students with LD and giftedness, focusing on 6 students in the form of case studies to give a more concentrated view. Unfortunately, although the methodology is discussed, it is rather vague in its presentation. Despite the lack of methodological clarity,

some statements about the experience of a home schooled child with LD were useful. Ensign discussed how parents stressed the importance of allowing students to pursue their passions and interests. Knowles et al. (1994) concurred that home schooling was more suitable for children with LD: “home schooling is thought to be a superior climate for such exceptional children, a place where pedagogies infrequently used in public schools might be employed and where the special needs of these children may be better met” (p. 241).

Kidd and Kaczmarek (2010) carried out a qualitative study, exploring the perspectives of 10 mothers who were home schooling children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), in Perth, Australia. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, the authors discovered a group of similar themes among all participants that defined the experience of home schooling children with ASD. All mothers expressed that their children had experienced a lack of individualized attention in school, high levels of social stress and anxiety in attending school, and an inappropriate academic achievement due to their specific challenges. After home schooling, all mothers described improvements in their children’s higher sense of well-being and lower levels of anxiety. They discussed how the individual learning needs of their children were being met; they were relieved by the flexibility of the home schooling environment, which allowed them and their children to adapt and adjust to the complicated and variable challenges of autism.

Duffey (2002) analyzed a survey of home schooled students (n=121) with a variety of special needs and coming from a variety of backgrounds and locations. She also did observations and interviews in four home school families with children who had special needs, using a phenomenological approach to understanding the complexities of

these families. Her methodology was rigorous in both types of research (quantitative and qualitative) and thoroughly presented in her article. She found that the mother-teachers of these children were highly educated with respect to their children's disabilities. Most had read a wide variety of material after their children's diagnoses. They had attended teaching and parenting workshops and seminars, did continuous internet searches, and belonged to support groups, both online and in person. These mothers used a wide variety of outside (the home) services to help their children and accessed curriculum resources that supported and enhanced the customized education of these children. Many of these parents chose to home school their children because of dissatisfaction with the public school's ability to meet the needs of their children. They also chose to home school because it was 'healthier' for their family in general.

Is Home Schooling a Model Worth Considering for Students with Learning Disabilities?

So, is home schooling a healthy educational alternative? Is it a model worth considering for further research? After a review of these studies, it would appear to be so. Actually, home schooling seems to be overwhelmingly healthy and, as such, should be examined further. The home schooling environment has some significant differences from mainstream school environments. Perhaps some of the characteristics are obvious, perhaps some less so. Within the specific set of circumstances in which many home schooled children find themselves, the results for academic and social gains are proving to be quite positive. Would it not be useful to look at these positive characteristics to further understand the value of the home schooling environment? Would the characteristics of this form of education be an asset for children with learning

disabilities? Within our regular classrooms, students with learning disabilities continue to struggle with social and academic challenges. Perhaps the home school environment has something valuable to offer.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This thesis involved three case studies of families who were home schooling a child with learning disabilities. Through this thesis, I continually worked to unravel the complexities and nuances of the home schooling family's specific situation and to explore the dynamics of the context within these families. 'Voice,' as described by Connelly and Clandinin (1990) as the "meaning that resides in the individual and enables that individual to participate in a community" (p. 4), was central to this thesis. Through these cases, I attempted to hear the voices of the children with learning disabilities, their families, and their teachers and/or mentors, as they negotiated the path of home schooling and accommodating the needs of learning disabilities.

All people have a story to tell. The story of the child with LD and her quest for education can be particularly complex and interesting, particularly when that child diverges from mainstream educational methods to get that education. Each case study is a story that needs to be heard so that data examined through this research can be contextualized within the framework of the lives of the people studied as well as those who may choose this path in the future. Was this home school experience meaningful, worthwhile, and healthy for those who were engaged in the activity? Could this activity be worthwhile for other families in the future? Schram (2006) suggested that "the story, precisely because it is a primary form of discourse used in every day interactions, is a natural, obvious, and authentic window into how people structure experience and construct meaning in their lives" (p. 105).

Data Collection: Tools for the Job

Participants

The central participants in this thesis research were three students, in their adolescence, who had learning disabilities and who home schooled. All other participants in the research were related to these children through their family and/or through their education. While the students were absolutely central to all research, the voices of their parents and selected teachers were also valuable in the collection of material. The principal informants of every case study were clearly the student and the main teaching parent in that family; however, the teachers or coaches (people not in the immediate family) were useful in the collection of data. The sample size was purposefully small since this research was qualitative in nature, and qualitative research emphasis is always placed on a deep, rich, and thorough understanding of the participants' experience (Hill, Thompson, & William, 1997; Patton, 2002; Schram, 2006). In the end, I thought that three main participants would be a useful number since it would provide some variety to my research, likely representing a variety of approaches to the home school method, while at the same time maintaining the integrity of in-depth research.

Before I could begin my recruitment process, I had to develop a set of criteria that was flexible and reasonable but still provided some level of consistency among the three different participants:

- 1) The students had to have been home schooled for at least 2 years. I made this stipulation to avoid students/families who were just experimenting with the home schooling process but who had not committed to or experienced a full cycle in the academic year.

- 2) The students had to be at an academic level that was between Grade 3 to 12. I did not want students below Grade 3 because, typically, parents/teachers are not always certain or clear about the extent of learning disabilities in a child until the child has had enough schooling so parents/teachers can recognize the differences between typically performing children and the child in question. I did not want to interview students who were past the Grade 12 level because that is traditionally an area of post-secondary education, which is a different academic/work experience.
- 3) The student had to have recognized learning disabilities, either through formal testing and/or through an obvious recognition that the student struggled extensively in academic work, despite reasonable instruction and accommodation within a specific time frame. As a researcher, I struggled with whether or not I should require specific tests for the student to meet this criterion. To do a full series of psycho-educational tests is an expensive process that is not always financially possible for all students, whether in regular school or home schooled. If I was going to require the tests, I would probably have to pay for them and that was not financially possible under the circumstances. In the end, I decided against a rigid definition of the label of learning disability. Due to the individual nature of the students, their families, and the home schooling process itself, almost every family to whom I talked (whether they were selected or not) had some legitimate ‘proof’ of their child’s learning disabilities, but many had different combinations of paperwork and experiences to demonstrate their child’s

challenges. The three students who were selected reflected this typical summation of paperwork and experience.

- 4) I aimed to find students who represented differing approaches to home schooling, as defined in much of the home-school literature. Often, home schoolers describe themselves as ‘unschoolers’ or structured schoolers (‘school at home’) or ‘eclectic’ home schoolers. I hoped to find students who might reflect these different approaches.

The recruitment process was rather informal, initially, as I asked various friends who home school to recommend people who might be interested in my research. I took the approach of purposeful snowballing, a method that allows the researcher to select informants based on information received from those informants, who then recommend other informants. This process continued to occur until the desired sample size was filled (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Once I had the name of someone, I initiated the contact by a telephone call. I clearly explained my intentions and requested some initial information to make sure that the child met my criteria. My biggest challenge was to convince people to participate because typically home schoolers can be nervous about displaying the intimate details of their chosen method of schooling since, in society in general, despite promising research, home schooling is frequently criticized with negative connotations. In the end, this negative positioning worked to my advantage as the home schoolers who had more confidence in themselves were often the ones who had been doing it the longest. The longevity helped me to meet the first criterion but discounted some families that otherwise might have had much to offer.

Once that initial phone call was made, I sent the families, by email, a Letter of Information and Consent Form so that they would fully understand what my expectations were. I followed up with another phone call or email and began to organize my initial interview with the family. Subsequent interviews or observations were made after that initial interview. As well, people who needed to be interviewed or classes/activities that needed to be observed were all organized in consultation with the principal informants, that is the student and her main teaching parent. These additional persons also were provided with a Letter of Information and gave informed consent. All Letters of Information and Consent Forms are found in Appendices A and B.

The following descriptions are a brief synopsis of the participants and their families:

- 1) Trisha: Trisha, at the time of research, was a 14-year-old girl, living with her parents in a modest home on a rural acreage in Eastern Ontario. She has three siblings, all younger than her, who have all been home schooled since birth, other than brief forays into traditional schooling. The family members self-describe themselves as unschoolers. Trisha's learning disabilities have been identified primarily through the difficult experiences of trying to educate her at home as well as in various age- and level-specific classrooms (such as in the home school co-op).
- 2) Ruth: Ruth, at the time of research, was a 13-year-old girl, living with her parents in a larger middle class home on a rural acreage in Eastern Ontario. She has one sister who is older. She and her sister have been home schooled since the earliest years of elementary school. Ruth's learning disabilities were first suspected when

she attended school in Kindergarten. When her challenges continued to present themselves in the home school environment, her parents had a variety of tests done to identify her disabilities.

- 3) Melissa: Melissa, at the time of the research, was a 17-year-old and nearing the end of her high school journey. She lives with her parents and sister in a large home outside a city in Eastern Ontario. Her sister is 12 years younger than Melissa. Both she and her sister have always been home schooled. Melissa suffered brain trauma as a toddler due to a freak and unexplained 'sudden death' from which she was resuscitated. After this event, she was left with physical disabilities and learning disabilities. Her learning disabilities have been well documented through extensive testing.

Time and Place

All the initial, longer interviews of participants took place in their homes (for a general idea of interview questions, see Appendix C; these questions were only used to ask principal, open-ended questions, not as an exclusive or exhaustive list). I selected their home as the main location for two reasons. I wanted the students and their parents to be as comfortable as possible. Also, by doing the interviews at their home, I was able to observe the children in their home education settings and to observe their interactions with siblings and parents. While my own presence had an effect on the participants' behaviour and on their display of setting (Schram, 2006; Wolcott, 2002), it was still possible to gather valuable data under the circumstances. Subsequent shorter interviews with the principal informants took place on the phone or in other settings such as at a home school conference or during an activity session.

Observations took place in a variety of other settings, as determined by the activity that I was observing. I observed the students in home school co-ops, at conferences during music lessons, during sport practices, at dance rehearsals, in shopping malls, and at social engagements. All observations and interviews took place from June of 2008 to February of 2009.

Archival search took place in many settings and occurred over a longer period of time. Some of the archival material used pre-dates the beginning of this thesis research process; however, much of the archival material was collected from January, 2008 when my thesis proposal was established, until the end of the observation/interview period in the winter of 2009.

Data Collection Strategies

Wolcott (2001) describes qualitative research activities through the visual image of a tree. It has three main branches, emanating from a solid trunk and is held together by deep roots. This image of qualitative research was a guiding principle throughout the research phase of this thesis. The core (trunk) of all research activities is the participant observation process. The three main branches of this process are defined through the interview strategies, the archival research strategies, and observational strategies. I like this image because all my research strategies revolved around my involvement as a participant and observer in the families of my case studies. Whether I was interviewing or observing a class or researching archival material through interaction with other home schoolers, I was always observing, while at the same time participating in the process. The tree image also emphasizes the roots that are deeply imbedded in the information-rich environment that is being researched. These roots are continuously tapping into the

everyday life of the people of my case studies, through enquiry, examination, and experience.

Interviews. Interviews were semi-structured. Goldring, Crowson, Laird, and Berk (2003) described the semi-structured format as “a phenomenological perspective ... we asked each principal open-ended questions where the researchers had little control over the principals’ responses” (p. 477). I had an established list of questions that I intended to cover with each type of informant (see Appendix C). For instance, I had a set of questions for all the students, another set for the main teaching parent, and another for teachers/coaches who worked with the students outside of their home. I felt that it was important to have similar questions asked of each group of people for categorization and organizational purposes later on during the analysis stage. I was also interested in specific information within the home school phenomenon so it was important to focus on specific topics; otherwise any variety of topics could have been discussed. However, the questions were purposefully simple and quite open-ended so that all informants would be able to describe freely their experiences. The interviews were conversational in style and typically lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to 2 hours.

The longest interviews were from the teaching parent who often had much to tell me. One of my interviews was a combined interview with a parent and child (Ruth and Barbara) because Ruth was more relaxed with her mother as part of the interview. I preferred to interview the students separately from their parents, which was perfectly fine with the other two students; however, I thought it was much more important to make sure that the informants were as relaxed as possible so that they would be comfortable sharing information with me. As a participant observer, even in the interview process, it was

important for me to engage and activate the informants in the most natural way possible rather than be rigid about the exact format that defined the interview process.

For each case study, I conducted a minimum of three main interviews, which consisted of the student, the main teaching parent, and at least one coach/teacher outside of the home (in Melissa's case, I interviewed two outside teachers). The interviews outside of the home were chosen in consultation with the student and her parent. I asked them to tell me who they thought was a significant person in their life, educationally and personally. The value that they placed on this informant was a significant factor in my choice. In each case study, there were also several informal conversations with all principal informants where some data were obtained. As well, some material was obtained during email conversations. However, these informal conversations and emails only formed a small portion of the overall data obtained about each student.

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed with the exception of Melissa's interview. I recorded her interview and fully intended to transcribe it, but the quality of her speech (due to her disability) was sufficiently impaired that it was impossible to transcribe her interview verbatim. Instead, I transcribed the portions that could be clearly heard, and I used summary notes I had taken about some of topics that she discussed that were not clear. Any direct quotes from her interview were directly transcribed, but much of her interview was analyzed from summary notes.

Observations. In each case, observations took place in the home school and outside of the home. Observations in the home environment had to be restricted to the time I spent before and after the interview process. Due to the intimate nature of home schooling, it would have been intrusive and unnatural to have sat for extended periods of

time 'watching' the students and their parents working with each other. I don't believe they would have behaved normally under those circumstances. Instead, I tried to spend as much time as possible with all members of the family before, during, and after the interview sessions, chatting casually, having a snack or meal with the participants, having them show me various points of interest, and having them introduce me to their lifestyle. By spending relaxed and friendly time with them, I was able to spend more time observing their environment, without being unnaturally intrusive. This form of observation demonstrates a basic form of participant observation in that I was a participant and observer at the same time (Geertz, 1973; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Wolcott, 1999, 2001). Observation in the home was typically from 3 to 5 hours per family in each case study.

Outside of the home, it was much easier to do direct field observation, that is, to observe the environment of the students without as much interaction. Less researcher interaction during observation periods does not necessarily produce better data than observation with more interaction, but it does produce a different perspective (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Wolcott, 2001). I thought there was a useful balance between the two types of observation. Observations outside the home typically lasted from 1 to 3 hours. Again, like the interviews, these observations were chosen in consultation with the student and her parent. We picked activities that had significant value in the student's life. For each outside [of the home] interview, I connected it with an observation of the same activity. I also did some observations of other activities that did not necessarily involve an interview but were useful for a further understanding of the student's

interactions in different environments. For each student I did between 4-6 hours of observation, outside of the home, in a minimum of two different settings.

Archival Search. Archival search for this thesis was quite extensive. Since I would only be working with three families, it was important for me to make a thorough archival search to understand the context in which these families operated. Again, participant observation played a key role in the nature of my search as I sought to understand the meanings of literature, activities, and processes that were a part of the home school environment. A significant portion of my research involved academic literature but, due to the limited nature of the literature, it was important to spend considerable time researching primary archival material. To that end, I subscribed to home schooling magazines and newsletters. I attended seminars and events that were advertised in those newsletters. I read hand-outs and web-sites that were discussed at these events. I attended home school conferences in Ontario, chatting with many presenters and home schoolers, and collecting material that was handed out. I read many books that were written for home schoolers. These books ranged from 'how-to' type manuals to philosophical or political discussions on the movement of home schooling. I tried to really immerse myself in the home school environment, through activity and literature, to understand the values and implications of this movement and the individuals who are a part of it.

Data Analysis: Making Sense of the Material

Data interpretation and analysis involves making sense out of what people have said, looking for patterns, putting together what is said in one place with what is said in another place, and integrating what different people have said. (Patton, 2002, p. 380)

Gathering reams of data is a futile exercise unless there is a method for organizing data in a manner that readers can make sense of what they are reading. As well, the interpretation and sharing of that experience, by the researcher, has to be of value to the audience and ultimately to future research. The human mind naturally wants to categorize elements in a way that allows a person to interpret the information to contextualize it into a greater set of experiences. In fact, McMillan and Schumacher (2006) state that “qualitative analysis is a relatively systematic process of coding, categorizing, and interpreting data to provide explanations of a single phenomenon of interest” (p. 364). Therefore, a significant task of this thesis was to organize and analyze the data to properly represent the phenomenon at hand.

Categorization and Codification

Throughout my research, I maintained broad strokes of discussion around the issues of academic individualization and social inclusion, as set out in my initial thesis proposal. These areas were very large and allowed for much opportunity for discussion and flexibility for different opinions and ideas. My conversations with the informants were quite flexible, but I always maintained the importance of focus on those two general areas. As a result, when it came time for analysis, it was relatively simple to maintain these same large categories. I may have had a different experience if I had discovered that these two areas were insignificant to the informants but, perhaps due to my past

knowledge and experience, I had a strong sense of what would be important for home schooling families dealing with learning disabilities.

The next step was to code themes that emerged within the larger categories (Hill et al., 1997; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Initially, I analyzed all three case studies to understand the themes that they had in common. The themes that emerged in the broad category of social inclusion were issues of friendship and social networks and the role of interest and context in social activity. Under the broad category of academic individualization, themes about the customizing of education and characteristics of instruction began to emerge as significant issues for most families that were home schooling. Finally, I realized that it would be important for me to describe, in a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973), the families and their values so that there would be a full understanding of where each family was situated, what was important to them, and why they did what they did. In a sense, this broader category would act as an introduction to each case study but it also was a significant discussion of each family’s history, its values, and its motivations for home schooling.

To organize all this data into these larger categories and themes, I developed a colour coding and a point-form chart system that would visually identify each category throughout the data. I used notes from each observation, transcripts, and specific archival material. All of these data sources went through the colour coding and the chart organizational system. Finally, I had my reflexive notes, a research diary where I had written thoughts throughout the research process. I maintained the colour coding/chart system for these notes as well, but these reflexive notes proved to be valuable in another level of processing. They formed an interim analysis as themes emerged during the

evolution of the research. This interim analysis provided a form of patterning so that it was easier to understand emerging thematic material. By reflexive notes, I was able to address some of the limitations that were discussed above, by challenging or reinforcing any previously held beliefs and ideas. In a sense, it forced me to take immediate notice of what my informants told me or what I was observing (Hill et al., 1997; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Patton, 2002).

The results outlined in the following chapters discuss the findings of my research through the categories that developed as I did my research and codified my results. Each family is divided into three main categories, including sub-categories for two areas.

The first category describes the biography and the background of the student and her family. It includes an examination of their values, their reasons for home schooling, how they initially got into home schooling, and how their home schooling journey connects with the learning disabilities with which they are dealing.

The second main category describes the social context of the student's home schooling journey. There are two sub-categories in this area. One discusses the findings on friendship and social networks of the student. The other describes the role of interest and context in the social life of this student.

The third main category explores the academic context of the student. The category also contains two sub-categories. One sub-category examines the academic environment of the student, including the customized nature of this environment, and the multi-tiered approach of one-on-one, small group, and classroom environments. The other category explores the instructional characteristics of the academic environment with

specific emphasis on instruction that demonstrates intensive, explicit characteristics as well as involving emotional and cognitive support.

CHAPTER 4: MELISSA

Melissa's World: Life and Values

Melissa's house is a large, spacious one at the top of a hill in a village close to a major urban centre. As I pull into the broad driveway and step into the front door, it is immediately apparent that the house is set up for someone in a wheelchair. There are few physical barriers for Melissa as she maneuvers around in her wheelchair to greet me. She has spacious, carpet free rooms to roam around in with the furniture accessible for wheelchair use. Melissa, her mother, Lucie, and her little sister, Annabelle, meet me together, calmly and respectfully at the door. Melissa's father, Doug, is away at work in the city. Lucie also has a physical disability as she has only about 5% vision (LI; see Appendix D for an explanation of codes used in each chapter). However, her vision challenges are not immediately apparent, nor are they noticeable throughout the observation and interview process that I undertake with Melissa and her family (MH).

Melissa, at 17, is a pretty girl with an open and honest face. She is in a battery-powered wheelchair at all times. Her movements are 'spastic,' which also affects her voice quality (MH). Sometimes she is hard to understand but once the conversation begins, she is a joy to speak with as her wit, thoughtfulness, and wisdom are immediately obvious. We have many laughs as she describes some of her life journey to me (MI). I also interview her mother who describes some of this same journey but with an underlying seriousness that outlines the difficult but rewarding path they have taken for Melissa's schooling (LI).

Lucie describes how their family's unusual journey began when Melissa was 14 months old. As she explains, "although she had always been healthy, Melissa suddenly died in my arms. Thirty minutes later, she was revived, which in itself is a miracle. She was, however, left with some brain damage, which presents itself physically and cognitively" (LI). Lucie states that they had always intended to home school: "We continue what we began the day she was born – home schooling" (LI).

Lucie is hugely committed to the concept of home schooling. She is actively involved in home school organizations, and she often writes articles for various home school publications. She intends to continue the home schooling process with their second daughter who is 12 years younger than Melissa and is a "very quick learner" (LI). Lucie talks of the excitement of working with both her daughters and seeing the different skills that develop as she teaches them (LI). Home schooling is something this family would do regardless of the level of ability or disability that was a part of their children's learning patterns. This family sees home schooling with a sense of Christian duty, a 'mission' to educate their children in a strong Christian environment. To add to this sense of mission is the fact that Melissa's disabilities are seen as an extra responsibility that God has ordained, a duty that they take seriously. They feel that home schooling is a path that can best serve her needs, particularly given her learning challenges.

Initially, in the home schooling process, Lucie and her husband thought that they would only have to work hard to overcome Melissa's physical disabilities. It was not until Melissa was 7 years old that they realized that they would have to overcome other challenges beyond her physical issues. At around this age, they noticed that she was really struggling with math and certain kinds of memory work. At the same time, Melissa

had an excellent memory for other visual and language details and learned to read quite easily. Eventually, Melissa's parents had comprehensive testing done by an educational psychologist, at which time, they realized that she had a number of severe learning disabilities (LI).

After this diagnosis, Lucie found the following years, when Melissa was between the ages of 8 to 12, the most difficult ones of their home schooling journey:

I did not grasp that home schooling and prayer just would not fix everything. I tried to keep up with the number of subjects taught at her grade, the level at which they were taught, and the timeline in which they should be accomplished. I consistently failed [to meet any of these expectations]. (LI)

Somehow Lucie's commitment to home school and the positive support that she got from therapists and educational advisors (who were often very impressed with Melissa's academic progress) has kept her going (LI).

Eventually, Lucie realized that she had to adjust her expectations to a program that was more customized for Melissa's special needs. Although Melissa had been achieving a high standard of accomplishment, given her challenges, their schedule of academics, therapy, and social activity was just too intense to be sustainable. To give themselves support and a better perspective, they joined groups that were organized for home schoolers with special needs; they attended seminars and conferences that focused on the needs of a child with learning disabilities and other disabilities. They read as much material as possible that emphasized the customized education required of a child like Melissa. "My curriculum, my goals, my home school did not need nor should it look remotely like anyone else's! I realized that I had not failed her because she was not on par with the 'normal child'" (LI).

Today, Melissa's schedule is a healthy balance of social, artistic, and physical activity as well as academic courses that focus on her strengths and develop her deficits. Her day must also include therapy in various forms. She is doing training to help her develop the necessary skills to be independent despite her use of a wheelchair, as well as developing the numerical skills that all adults should acquire to negotiate financial situations. Melissa is a vibrant young woman with many talents to offer, talents that have been encouraged and developed through her unique home schooling lifestyle.

Melissa's Social Context

Friendships and Social Networks

Melissa, by nature, appears to be a very social person. Certainly, when I observe her, she is socially engaged, happily involved in the activity, and clearly having a good time with the people around her (MO, MDC, MH). People who know her well view her as socially active. Her independence worker sees her as "social, talkative, and outgoing" (MIVT). Her teacher describes the joy with which Melissa participates in dance classes (MDC). As her mother explains, "she needs to be out, she's got to make that effort to get out there and be involved in things because she loves being with people" (LI).

On Melissa's desktop page of her computer, she has placed a picture of herself, dressed beautifully and looking radiant, after a dance performance, surrounded by her best friends. Lucie makes a point of showing me this picture as she feels that it exemplifies Melissa's social experiences with all its complexities (MH, LI). The picture is bittersweet because these people clearly support Melissa and care about her enough to come to the recital. She also often talks about these friends in our conversations (MI,

MO). Unlike most girls her age, however, all her best friends are mature adults. After seeing this picture, I want to know more about the social life of this child who has so many social gifts to offer but who either has an unusual social network and/or struggles with social access to people of her own age (MH).

Melissa discusses her many weekly activities with enthusiasm. She is engaged in an outside (of the house) activity generally every day of the week. These activities bring her in contact with people of a wide variety of ages. Since some of her activities also involve people with disabilities, she has been exposed to a wide variety of people with different levels of ability. She has participated in a selection of church activities over the years, including Sunday school, youth group, choir, worship dance, and drama. These groups involve people of all ages, including many people within her peer group. Melissa is also involved in a performance dance troupe that includes dancers with diverse levels of ability and disability. She volunteers at a seniors' home on the weekends and has done volunteer work at a travel agency

When asked what she enjoys the most socially, Melissa answers, "I enjoy all the people that I get to be with, hard to pick really but, honestly, I would have to say that I enjoy my time with Carolyn the most" (MI). Carolyn is Melissa's worker/teacher who helps her with independence training and, given the educational and professional nature of Carolyn's involvement, it is somewhat surprising that Melissa would choose this person and the activities that she does with Carolyn as her favourite social engagement. Melissa goes on to say that "Carolyn and I have become really good friends. We will have lunch together and then go shopping for three hours. Sometimes, we will have a really long lunch just so that we can talk and talk" (MI).

Melissa has known the young people in her youth group for a long time so, potentially, they could be a source of good friendships. However, she seems to be rather evasive in her responses about this group: “I do enjoy spending time with these friends” (MI). In contrast, Melissa talks significantly about her older friends whom she has met in various activities (“some of my best friends are 20 years older than me”) and about the people in her dance troupe, most of whom have physical disabilities (MI). Although she does not spend her entire day with her peer group, she does appear to have sufficient opportunity to meet friends of her own age (MO, MDC, MI, LI). Either her selection of older friends is a personal preference, or it is due to barriers that are limiting her desire/ability to access more friends within her age group.

Carolyn, the aforementioned friend and worker of Melissa, expresses concern that Melissa is not developing enough friends with people her own age. One-on-one, she certainly believes that Melissa is socially very strong. “With me, she is social, talkative and outgoing although I don’t know how she is able to act in a group environment” (MIVT). Carolyn is not sure if this lack of same-age friends is due to home schooling or the nature of Melissa’s family, but she feels that Melissa should have many more opportunities to spend time with her peers and that school would probably have given her that opportunity (MIVT). When the youth group experience is discussed, Carolyn agrees that there may still be some challenges for Melissa in becoming a part of a peer group of her age due to her speech difficulties (she can be hard to understand, particularly when she gets excited or laughs at the same time) and because she has a hard time keeping up socially as well as physically in larger groups.

Melissa is able to comfortably have in-depth conversations with one person at a time but in a group setting she is often relegated to the social periphery because she can't process, verbally intake, and express ideas at a fast enough rate for a larger group (LI, MI, MH, MO). These communication issues create particular challenges in a group of teens where the verbal discourse is often very rapid and full of subtle nuances that require a quick level of processing. Vocal expression is also challenging for Melissa because, although her speech is understandable, it takes an extra effort to 'tune in' to the nuances of her speech. Melissa's needs seem to require a certain level of social maturity of the people with whom she is socializing.

Unfortunately, teenagers, especially in a group environment, do not always take the time that is required to make Melissa a part of the group. "Young people just don't have the time for her, for the extra effort it takes to be with her, not just the physical stuff but with the communicating because her speech isn't clear ... well, they can be quite self-centered, frankly" (LI). Lucie reflects that, in her experience, very few youth environments seem to be capable of this level of social maturity, perhaps because, being young people, they are just learning social skills themselves.

I mean like the youth group, it's been very frustrating because you know, you try and advocate, you try and talk to the leaders about all this stuff but they don't make much of an effort to make activities work [in their program]. (LI)

In contrast, the potential for social maturity in mature adults makes them more likely candidates for friendship in Melissa's life (LI, MI, MDC, MO). Although Melissa is challenged by rapid cognitive processing and speech of language, she is generally not delayed by her maturity and level of communication response. If the pace is slowed down to a level that she can handle, she is able to participate fully (LI, MH).

The Role of Interest and Context in Social Engagement

Melissa's need for social engagement and an environment that can suitably handle her social needs has led her to explore many different interests and activities. Essentially, her interests could be divided into two main categories: interests that are creative and expressive in nature and interests that involve working with people (LI, MI, MH, MDC). In fact, Melissa would love to have a career where she is able to combine some of her creative interests with working with people, if that were possible (LI). As she nears the end of her high school journey, Melissa is looking at various career options and Melissa and her parents have taken these interests into consideration as they have talked to colleges and people in various fields (LI).

As Lucie says, "Melissa is very creative ... the physical [challenge] has totally put her in prison as far as being creative, but she, you know, she does what she can with the dance, and she does what she can with the poetry and with the PowerPoint" (LI). In fact, Melissa has always expressed herself through art, and particularly performance in art, from the time she was quite young,

Well, I mean, Melissa has always loved performing ... she was involved in front line choir (when she was younger) and it was very professionally done and it wasn't just singing, it was like an actual play ... she loved that kind of thing. (LI)

Her love of music, of visual graphics, and of poetry has led Melissa to a passion for creating beautiful PowerPoint presentations that are really visual and poetic creations of art.

The interest she has in working with people is also a significant part of her life. Melissa has worked with both seniors and with young children, and she truly enjoys working with both age groups (LI). Her latest project involves teaching Sunday school on

a weekly basis and, as Lucie says, “I would say that Sunday school has been an incredible experience for her ... I mean it’s been huge” (LI). In some ways, the positive experience has been related to the academic and communication skills that are required of her to run the class but, on a social level, it has also been invaluable because she truly enjoys working with the children (MI, LI). As well, it has given her social status within her church community as she has taken on a leadership role and has to actively engage with the parents as well as with the children (LI, MI).

It is Melissa’s creative drive and desire to work with people that has led to another activity that has become central to her life. She became involved with a dance school that specialized in doing dance classes for people of mixed ability. The dance school was created to provide an outlet for people with varying physical and mental abilities (also including people without any significant disability) who wanted to express themselves physically through dance (MDC). At first glance, this would seem to be an unlikely activity for Melissa to participate in, as she is in a motorized wheelchair, but she thrived in the recreational program, to the point where they invited her to be involved in their touring company.

For the uninitiated, dance for disabled people might appear to be an oxymoron, but when I first viewed a video of a dance duet that Melissa did at a professional arts venue, I was astounded at the beauty of the visual display (MH). This truly is a very meaningful expression of art and has given Melissa huge social, personal, and potentially even professional opportunities. Melissa is beautiful to watch as she artistically expresses herself through dance (MDC, MH). Significantly, it has also become an important part of her social life as she clearly enjoys her social time at the dance rehearsals (MDC, LI, MI).

In some ways, this group best represents a ‘peer group’ for her because she has friends who have struggled with challenges as she has, they have walked unique paths in their lives as they have negotiated their disabilities, and they tend to be young adults who may not be the exact same age as her but are often only a few years older than she is.

Whatever the reason, she clearly ‘fits in’ to this environment (MDC).

At this point in her life, Melissa is almost ready to move on to post-secondary education and so the search for meaningful work or education has begun. Lucie and Melissa have talked to a number of people within educational institutions, and they are optimistic about Melissa’s ability to receive support for her learning disabilities and to have good physical access to the buildings. In the meantime, they are trying to find career options that would blend her interests in working with people and her creative drive. They have looked seriously at career possibilities, such as a travel agent for the disabled and graphic arts, but Melissa is not sure that either will meet her interests sufficiently. In the meantime, she continues to tour with the dance troupe and, because they frequently travel to areas where most people are French speaking, she has decided to focus on learning the French language sufficiently so that she can talk to the audiences in French as well as English (LI, MI).

Melissa’s Academic Context

Academic Individualization: A Customized Education

The customization of schooling has been an underlying and evolving theme in the pursuit of an appropriate education for Melissa. As Lucie emphatically states, “necessity is the mother of all invention: this became my motto as everything we did needed

modification to some degree” (LI). Initially, Lucie really struggled with how to customize Melissa’s schooling. She and her husband value a high quality education for both their daughters, regardless of their level of ability (LI). However, with time, expectations had to come in line with ability without sacrificing the benefits of a rigorous education. This has been an evolving process that the entire family has undergone and, by the time of this research, both Lucie and Melissa have a strong sense of peace and satisfaction with the nature and rate of progress in Melissa’s education (MI, LI).

Much of Lucie’s original frustration lay in the fact that she was trying to emulate the home schooling experience that was evident in other home schooling families (LI). Even at this point, it is possible to sense the underlying tension that exists in Lucie’s perception of a more ‘normal’ schedule that involves starting at regular school time (around 8:30) and finishing some time in the early afternoon so that there is time for outside activities. “Everything’s so slow so I have to really deal with that ... I cannot compare with any other family ... we start at 8:30 but, well, we have to start with physiotherapy, not academics.” She and Melissa have really struggled to ‘get it all done’, to cover the curriculum and therapies that they feel are important for her development.

After years of being challenged by competing demands for Melissa’s time, she and her mother have developed a schedule that encourages remediation of her weaknesses but also allows her time to develop her strengths. Since they begin with daily physiotherapy that starts before she gets out of bed, academic activity does not really commence until 11 a.m. or so, after the morning personal routine and Bible devotions have been finished. One important subject is covered each morning and, at the time of the interview, Melissa’s online writing course is taking priority. This writing course is an

area of significant interest for Melissa but also an area where she is challenged by the amount of typing and writing output that is necessary for the course (LI, MI). Melissa's day continues with civics or history up to three times a week and science another two times a week. Melissa also loves to have time for reading, particularly historical fiction, as well as time for creative activity such as designing PowerPoint presentations or other work on the computer. Following all this academic activity, she attends a daily activity outside her home (MI, LI).

The current schedule is greatly modified from what Melissa and her mother used to do. For years, they would struggle through long days of home schooling that ended with academics still ongoing into the early evening because of all the challenges that needed to be met. For instance, they tried to do regular academic math daily, creating much frustration for Melissa and disappointment for Lucie: "She struggled greatly with math concepts ... she just could not get it ... she could not memorize or learn anything to do with numbers" (LI). At this point, they are just focusing on her need for math in everyday activities, like shopping, budgeting, and paying bills (MI, MO, MIVT). After much experimentation, research, and reading, they have come to realize that it is valuable to distribute and modify all of Melissa's activities so that she can have a more balanced day. Structure has also become important to their system. They have to be extremely organized and, by nature and by design, they strive to be very structured: "We have to, to get it all done ... I need to have it [a schedule] written down, I need to have this accountability of saying, no, we need to do this stuff" (LI).

Despite the challenges that have arisen in Melissa's school journey, several of the people who work with her believe that, academically, she has had the best education she

could possibly have had (LI, MIVT, MDC, MO). In a rather glowing tribute, the worker who helps Melissa with her independence training (who has worked with many other people with similar physical and intellectual disabilities) expresses that Melissa has benefited enormously from home schooling in an academic sense. She feels that Melissa has done so many things that are interesting and that she has learned so much:

Melissa's mom is so organized and dedicated to her daughter's learning, the one-on-one relationship, the tutoring has been hugely beneficial ... she has probably learned way more that she would have in a public setting. (MIVT)

An occupational therapist who worked with Melissa when she was younger was also significantly impressed with Melissa's academic progress. When she organized some testing to see what Melissa was capable of, she gave Melissa's parents some very negative results: "Melissa should not be able to read ... and she has severe ADD" (LI). Lucie emphasized that Melissa already read and read well. In response, the therapist responded "she wouldn't have, if she hadn't been home schooled" (LI). When Melissa was 13, Lucie and her husband had to attend a seminar for parents who had children with disabilities at Melissa's treatment centre. They were told of all the skills that Melissa had to acquire before she reached adulthood (LI). They were pleasantly surprised to hear that they had already been achieving many of these skills: "I was so encouraged to find out that we had already done it all. She was already doing what they did not expect her to do until she was 18!" (LI).

In essence, creativity, flexibility, and dedication, all within the parameters of organized structure, have been the hallmarks of Melissa's customized education. By "doing what had to be done" (LI) for Melissa on a daily, monthly, and yearly basis, Lucie and her husband have designed an education that strives to meet Melissa's needs. The

personal attention, the one-on-one tutorial style delivery, and the ability to access the resources that were necessary for Melissa's development through the different stages, have made a huge difference in her educational journey. As well, Lucie has a particular ability to deliver instruction in a manner that meets Melissa's cognitive abilities.

Academic Individualization: Characteristics of Instruction

Lucie spends considerable time in the interviews discussing the methods of instruction that both she and her husband have had to develop in their search to meet Melissa's needs. Melissa has made significant progress but it has only been through explicit and intense instruction/coaching and through emotional and cognitive support that her educational journey has been so successful. As Lucie states emphatically,

I believe with all my heart that it was this intense one-on-one time spent with Melissa day after day, year after year that has allowed her to progress to where she is today. This time and love could not have been given to her in a school system. (LI)

For instance, both Lucie and her husband have used much time and money to become official therapists or instructors for a variety of intensive programs that they have used to aid in Melissa's development. They have developed skills in the areas of physiotherapy, reading instruction, and skills training pertinent to children with learning disabilities. These therapies or methods are done regularly and systematically throughout the week, according to design. Fulfilling the requirements for these programs requires tremendous discipline and dedication for both parents and student. One can almost hear the fatigue in Lucie's voice when she is asked about the physiotherapy schedule that they follow: "The physiotherapy is done every day while she's still in bed, we do it every day, yes every day, every day" (LI).

Intense and explicit instruction is essentially part of almost every learning process into which Melissa delves. Recently, when Melissa decided she wanted to teach Sunday school, her mother had to systematically and explicitly demonstrate all the steps that were required before she entered the classroom as well as the steps that were required once she began to teach.

We struggled for a few months because I was having to do so much work for her, to show her how to do everything and then I came upon [the idea] of making a template for her ... she now is able to go through the template and say okay I've done this and I need to do this and I need to collect this material. I've now incorporated this strategy into other activities. (LI)

Communication training is also something they have worked on. Melissa enjoys conversation and is a pleasure to talk to but she often struggles with initiating conversations, partly due to the physical limitations of her voice but also due to the cognitive challenges of complete and thorough conversations. Lucie has been working with her on a systematic approach to cognitive communication that explicitly lays out the process required to start, continue, and end conversations. During the interview, we joke that perhaps many teenagers would benefit from this program! However, for Melissa, the explicit and intense process of learning is particularly beneficial (LI, MIVT).

Cognitive support has been another underlying principle of Lucie's approach to Melissa's education. Since Melissa was so challenged both physically as well as cognitively, Lucie had to creatively devise methods of instruction that would help Melissa learn, achieving progressive results but not becoming too frustrated in the process. To make matters even more complicated, Melissa's ADD makes it difficult for her to focus so Lucie has to work hard to sustain her interest and attention. Lucie describes the early days of their home schooling journey:

I would see a craft or worksheet I wanted Melissa to attempt, and so we made a way. Since she had limited control of a pencil and could not form numbers or letters, I created my own sheet where she would either circle or draw lines to the right answer. We also had stamp pads that had numbers on them. She would be able to choose the number and hand-over-hand we would ink the number she wanted. I did not want things locked up inside her just because she couldn't get them on paper herself ... these challenges were time consuming and required me to spend some time each evening planning and preparing ideas. (LI)

To this day, Lucie gives tremendous cognitive support to Melissa's learning process (MH, MI, LI). Melissa loves to read and reads extensively but she is a slower reader due to the physical challenges of eye muscle movement. As well, Melissa's comprehension of her reading material can be challenged by her learning disabilities. To encourage her academic development, Lucie frequently will read to her so that Melissa can use her energy to focus on the comprehension and meaning behind the words. Lucie is also pushing Melissa to read more advanced literature that challenges her understanding of moral issues or character development. She is encouraging her to read some of the classics of literature so that she learns to follow more complicated language. For Melissa to learn from these books, it is vital that Lucie scaffold the learning process through continuous, supportive dialogue, helping her to understand one aspect of the literature before moving on to the next:

I am trying to push her a little bit so I will read to her because I know she won't get it if she just reads it or I will get her to read an abridged version of a classic and then we will read the full, classic version together and I will have to ask her many questions and point out many things so that she will better understand, like why is that character relating to this and which way are they doing that, you know. (LI)

Emotionally, Lucie tries to encourage and support Melissa every step of the way. Because Melissa's educational journey is extremely challenging, Lucie and her husband have struggled to create a productive learning environment for Melissa that has high

standards but still manages to be relevant and fair and encourages healthy social and academic growth. In recent years, much of Melissa's education has been focused on encouraging the skills and independence that she needs to function productively in an adult environment, whether that is through college or in a workplace. Melissa's parents have encouraged her to find her strengths and to capitalize on those strengths for participation and employment (LI, MI, MO, MDC). At home, Lucie often tries to make the curriculum relevant to activities that Melissa does in the various aspects of her life (LI). Melissa's parents want to encourage her social, physical as well as her academic development and, above all, they want her to be happy through the process. For a young girl in a motorized wheelchair who has some communication challenges, the encouragement of independence is critical to her happiness and social and academic freedom. To this end, Melissa's parents have done everything in their power to encourage her in this process through academic individualization, social integration, and personal fulfillment (LI, MIVT, MDC, MI).

CHAPTER 5: TRISHA

Trisha's World: Life and Values

Trisha is a 13-year-old girl who lives with her parents, three siblings, and many Bernese Mountain dogs, on a small rural acreage in Eastern Ontario. She is the oldest of the children who range in age from 6 to 13. Her father, Paul, is a stone mason and general carpenter, and her mother home schools the children and runs a dog kennel business. The many Bernese Mountain dogs, which form a background of barks, fur, and begging, are an integral part of the observation and interview process at their house. Trisha's mother, Lydia, breeds these beautiful dogs, and they form a significant part of Trisha's life and interests.

At the time of the home interview and observation, life is in full swing at this home schooling household (TH; see Appendix D). Since it is the last week of June, less formal schooling work is being accomplished and priorities are shifting to filling and organizing the pool deck for summer fun. While the family waits for the water truck to arrive to fill the pool, various schooling activities are occurring throughout the small house. Trisha's only brother has a friend over, and the boys are busily alternating between a computer project and a LEGO project that is forming on the living room floor. Her youngest sister is helping her father organize the garden, and her other sister is playing the piano. Trisha is sketching and doodling on a pad. Her sketches, although casual, are quite sophisticated. When she finishes drawing, she goes to practice her violin.

During all this activity, I am struck by how mature, serene, and calm Trisha remains, in the midst of multiple layers of action (TH). The house where this family lives is not big so there is no opportunity to leave the scene of activity and move to a quieter location. Despite this activity level, Trisha and her siblings are easily able to focus on their chosen activities and address their interests with maturity and attention. Lydia has created an environment of unschooling for her children that she describes as, “We do whatever motivates them, whatever they are interested in ... if you are learning what you are interested in, that becomes important information and it leads you to much other information” (TIM).

Trisha’s educational career began in a regular school, where she attended a small rural school in the interior of British Columbia. However, her school attendance was short-lived as she only went to the school for two whole days at the age of 4. Being a shy child (TIM), Trisha began to cry; her crying became so disruptive that her teacher put her in a separate room and left her there on her own. Lydia says that the experience was traumatic for all of them and that the school had such a bad reputation that it was simpler to keep Trisha at home: “a new teacher, a bad principal, in the end there was quite a few parents that pulled their kids and did home schooling” (TIM).

Lydia and Paul began to read about home schooling and to realize the benefits of home schooling. They found a number of resource materials that would help them on their home schooling journey. They enjoyed the freedom that the home schooling environment had to offer, especially when they took on an unschooling lifestyle. They liked the fact that they could follow their children’s interests and that the children were motivated to learn (TIM; TI). Since then, they have participated in a variety of activities

designed for home schoolers and for schooled children. Trisha and her siblings have been actively involved in a home school co-op, which eventually turned into a part-time school for parents who wanted to home school but also wanted some school structure. The children have also been very active in a number of community activities and sports. As a family, they are involved in their township's community associations and are quite well known around their town.

Around the time when Trisha was attending the part-time school, Lydia noticed that Trisha struggled with learning, particularly when she and Paul saw her working alongside other children (TIM, TI). Lydia says that this possibility of seeing Trisha in relation to same-age peers was one advantage to an age-based school setting (TIM). Trisha and her parents realized that she struggled to read and that math was a significant challenge as well (TI, TIM). Her siblings were not nearly as challenged academically so it was not just the learning environment that the three children had experienced.

It became clear that Trisha had learning disabilities, although this is a term that Trisha's parents have never used when talking to her. They recognize her challenges, but these challenges are considered a part of who she is, and Lydia and Paul are careful not to label her in a specific manner. They feel her needs must be met without jeopardizing her self-esteem in the process, and they are very concerned that I not use this term, namely, learning disabilities, in front of Trisha. Trisha and her parents have had to work hard to find methods and curriculum that have helped her to learn in her challenge areas (TIM, TI). Trisha expresses quite freely about the different routes they have had to take for her to process math and reading (TI). At the time of this research, she reads quite well and continues to work hard to overcome her difficulties in math.

Trisha's Social Context

Friendships and Social Networks

All home schooling in this family is integrated as part of the family's overall lifestyle. Consequently, Trisha's friendships and social networks are an integral part of all the activities that she does. She has participated in a variety of activities from traditional school, to a cooperative part-time school, to a variety of home school co-ops. She has also done a variety of 'extra-curricular' activities (this term is in some ways a misnomer because, for an unschooler, no activity is 'extra-curricular'!) with her current favourite ones consisting of violin, orchestra, and dog obedience and showing dogs. Through all these activities, she gains friends and social networks that are a crucial part of her social life (TB, TIV, TIM, TI). As well, family friends are the children's friends (TI, TIM), and these friendships carry just as much weight as a friend who is the same age as Trisha.

The multi-age nature of her social network is a prominent characteristic that is discussed in all interviews and seen in all observations about Trisha (TIM, TI, TIV, TH). Her mother states that "she would naturally gravitate to them [someone of her own age] to some extent but she is not embarrassed to play with anybody younger ... it's more about who the kid is, as opposed to how old they are" (TIM). At the other end of the age spectrum, Trisha is equally comfortable with adults. Her violin teacher talks about the social environment of the orchestra that Trisha plays in: "social interaction between the kids and the adults; most of the time it's the adults who initiate that, but then you never see a kid sort of hang back by themselves and, you know, not really want to talk" (TIV). Trisha herself says that she really likes the fact that there are adults and it isn't just kids in

the orchestra, that there is a nice mixture of ages (TI). Trisha does not hesitate to call an adult a friend, as she often refers to her friend who drives her to dog obedience classes. When asked if she prefers chatting with adults or with kids, she answers, “It really doesn’t matter to me, for me it is all the same” (TI).

While friends of a variety of ages create a rich social environment (TIM, TIV), it is also important for a 13-year-old girl to have friends of her own age. When asked about these types of friendships, both Trisha and her mother express concern about the lack of home schooled friends available in her area that she could be-friend as part of her home-schooled day (TIM, TI). “The one thing I wish for this area in particular is just that there were more people doing it [home schooling], more kids her age doing it” (TIM). When asked what she likes least about home schooling, Trisha says, “For me, it would be not having enough girls my age ... with kids you can talk about different things than adults” (TI). The dilemma of the lack of home schooled peers her age stems from the fact that more families tend to home school their children when they are younger. It is more unusual to see children home schooled in their teen years. This is a phenomenon that is apparent in all home schooling environments and is particularly prominent in an area where there are not large numbers of home schoolers to start with (TIM). Despite this disadvantage, Trisha does have friends her own age that she has met either through home schooling or through activities. She has a friend that she met through a dog showmanship class, she has friends that she met through the home school co-op, and she even has a friend who is close enough to walk to—a big deal when you live in the country!

The Role of Interest and Context in Social Engagement

Interest is a guiding principle in this family's home schooling philosophy. Lydia spends much time following the interests of her children and using those interests to develop their academic skills (TIM). As a result, interest plays a significant role in Trisha's level of social engagement. When Trisha talks about her friends and social networks, she has accessed most of these people through her varied interests and activities that take place outside the home (TI). When Lydia talks about interests, she talks about the social/personal characteristics that Trisha has developed through the home schooling environment, which involves connecting with people within chosen activities that revolve around interest (TIM). Trisha, like many children with learning disabilities, is not very comfortable in academic environments (TIM). The home schooling environment, with its social connections being made through interest-based activity, allows Trisha to connect with most of her social network in contexts where she is comfortable and often where she excels.

Trisha discusses, at great length, the activities in which she has been involved over the years. When asked what she did this year outside of the home, she states, "I've done a bunch of classes ... many things" (TI). Her current passions are her violin and playing in the orchestra. She has also been involved in dog-handling classes and in various events that are organized through some different home school co-operatives. I observe her, for example, at a basketball activity planned by a local co-op, where Trisha is clearly comfortable socially, talking to people of all ages (TB). This home school co-op, typical of many that I have seen, involves family members of all ages. Officially, the basketball activity involves a couple of groups of children, playing in designated age

groups. Unofficially, most of the socializing is happening outside of the realm of basketball. Parents chat in small groups, preschoolers play at the playground, and teenagers who aren't playing (Trisha is one of them) chat with each other or with other adults. It is a very socially engaging scene. It is from this type of activity that Trisha has gained most of her friendships (TI).

Trisha's violin activities are, currently, her central passion and have been so for several years now. She attends a weekly lesson throughout the year and orchestra once a week from September to June. She performs concerts, travels with the orchestra to do shows at schools, and even did a recording during the past year (her favourite day of the year). Her teacher/leader states that she organizes these events because "they are always fun to do, because it is a very social thing to do, as well" (TIV). Her teacher continues by saying that Trisha excels in these activities, often taking an active role and working hard to achieve the standard, despite her relatively few years of playing (TIV). Trisha even took a lead role in a performance that they toured around to various venues at Christmas time. Certainly when I attend her violin lesson, I observe that Trisha displays a natural maturity and a comfortable, respectful manner when discussing her progress with her teacher. She takes responsibility for her work, has fun working with her teacher, and is organized and focused in her approach (TV). Her mother wonders if Trisha would have the confidence to take on a similar role in an academic environment, such as school, where she would be at more of a disadvantage (TIM).

Lydia emphasizes the social benefits of the home schooling environment for Trisha:

I think it is healthier [home schooling] because she has a sense of who she is, she has more confidence, even if she doesn't excel academically, she has something

positive that she knows she is good at ... I think that will help you making friends all around. (TIM)

Lydia talks about how she feels that Trisha has a strong self-esteem and confidence and maturity that are developed through all the positive reinforcement that she gets by attending activities where she is comfortable and excels. She feels that home schooling allows Trisha to contribute more time to these interests, which, in turn, build up her confidence through experience:

Even if she struggles academically, she'll have her music proficiency to fall back on or, you know, the other things she's been doing like doing her dog show handling, working in the ring there, just building her self-esteem ... I think all in all it'll help her socially, knowing who she is and being comfortable where she's at. (TIM)

This comment is echoed by Trisha's violin teacher, "this is something I have noticed with all home schooled kids like Trisha: their self-esteem is so much more ... they're more mature inherently, you know, they haven't gone through that process of peer pressure" (TIV). Trisha herself says her favourite part of home schooling is "having more time for everything" that matters to her, the things that build her up instead of knocking her down, the way academics sometimes do (TI). In turn, she has the confidence to connect with people who are in her social network and to make friends as they become available.

Trisha's Academic Context

Academic Individualization: A Customized Education

The style of education in this household can best be described as a 'customized education.' The parents, Paul and Lydia, do everything in their power to create an educational environment and encourage educational activities that are unique and individualized for each of their children (TIM). Their primary concern is to follow the

interests of all their children. In turn, the focus on interest in this family leads to a continuous search for curriculum, resources, and instruction that are customized for each child. For Trisha, who has learning disabilities, this individualized and customized program has been an invaluable component of her education (TIM, TI, TIV, TV).

Lydia says that “my whole philosophy of learning is different than school” (TIM). As noted previously, Lydia’s philosophy of education is often described, in home schooling circles, as unschooling. When asked how she would define unschooling within the educational environment she and Paul have created, Lydia explains:

Not doing any formal curriculum, just sort of everything is child-led, wherever their interest takes them, which takes them to any number of topics you can cover in a school day as you cover the different aspects of that interest. It is about not being focused on grades and where they should fit in and if they have ‘covered’ their times tables at the right time. (TIM)

The success of ‘unschooling,’ from Lydia’s point of view, means that Trisha is always motivated to learn when she is pursuing an interest. Her customized education allows her to use skills that might get unused, due to her learning challenges, if she had to work on topics that were of no interest to her. She will reach far beyond the level that she would otherwise study in a more structured format because she is motivated to learn about the topic for her own reasons. Lydia describes this process:

For instance, Trisha has an interest in dogs, and she started with where the dogs come from and so she picks up some geography. Then, that interest leads her to biology and genetics because of the breeding, you know, biology way beyond her age level just because that is where her interest is. (TIM)

An unschooling environment may appear to be very relaxed or casual, as an approach, but that is not necessarily the case. Lydia spends considerable time seeking out resources and people that match the needs and interests of her children. Searching for the right curriculum, for instance, can be a challenge, particularly when trying to meet the

needs of a child with learning disabilities. Both Lydia and Trisha discuss their attempts to find a useful math program. “We are doing the Jump Math by John Mighton, which is an alternative math because math is definitely not her strong subject” (TIM). They had been working with more traditional math programs, but these programs just were not working for Trisha. Trisha says that “a lot of math books, I didn’t really understand so this makes more sense to me than a lot of other ones” (TI). There is no hesitation to seek out the best resource that is available, even if it means an unusual choice in programming.

People are an equally important aspect of a customized environment for Trisha’s education. It is a fallacy that home schooled children are schooled only by their parents at home (TIM, TI, TIV). Trisha’s customized education includes a variety of teachers and classes that engage her in her interests across a diversity of instructional environments. She receives one-on-one instruction from teachers who are experts in their topic, such as her violin teacher (TIV, TV). She receives one-on-one tutorials quite frequently from her parents. She also attends small classes that are organized around a particular interest area, such as the show dog handling classes. She has also attended many multi-age small- to medium-sized classes organized by the home school community (TI, TB). Her parents enrol her in these classes as they strive to meet her individual needs and interests. It is thus a personalized and customized education.

Academic Individualization: Characteristics of Instruction

One of the huge benefits to this type of home schooling education is the level of academic and emotional support that Trisha gets within these personalized educational environments (TIM, TV, TIV). During my observation of her violin lesson, it becomes obvious that she has developed a healthy working relationship with her teacher that is

most productive for learning. As Trisha is challenged by certain skills, her teacher is able to encourage her gently but firmly towards her working goals. There exists a mature camaraderie between Trisha and her teacher that creates a comfortable and supportive atmosphere for learning. Trisha is receiving a constant flow of positive criticism that, under different conditions, might have been overwhelming. However, this teacher knows Trisha well and knows how to address her needs. She gives Trisha continuous and encouraging dialogue that supports her through various steps of learning each skill. She monitors and regulates each step so that Trisha does not go onto another step until she is comfortable with the skill that they are pursuing (TV, TIV).

The lack of peer pressure has, overall, been a decidedly positive aspect of Trisha's customized education, particularly given some of her learning challenges. As her mother says,

One of the benefits of being out of school is that she can move at her own pace ... she is comfortable to going back to a lower level book because she understands the process of trying to understand it first and then moving forward ... in school, with the peer pressure, you can't work at a much lower level than where you should be grade wise so, in the end, that could affect her self-esteem. (TIM)

In the violin lesson described above, there is no peer pressure and a supportive teacher who enables Trisha to learn effectively, despite some of her learning challenges. In the home environment, she is able to get similar support as she works through subjects with her mother. For instance, in the area of math, she struggles to accomplish the level that would be standard for her age; however, since she does not have that constant peer pressure to remind her of this fact, she is able to work at the level that is necessary for her to make progress (TI, TIV).

On another level, Trisha gets explicit instruction from her mother in problem subject areas such as math. When asked if she prefers to work on math at home or at school, Trisha answers, “at home, because I can have my mom beside me instead of having them going all over the place helping a bunch of kids ... so that made math a lot easier” (TI). Despite the less structured learning environment in her and Paul’s home, Lydia has obviously made an effort to explicitly instruct Trisha and her siblings in certain subject areas. Trisha states that, “Well, for some subjects, she helps us a lot, like math ... when we were younger, she ended up helping us with reading and other stuff ... so that we don’t have to be distracted from other things and we can get more work done” (TI). Lydia also talks about the balance that is necessary between following the children’s interests and working with them on specific areas that she calls “the basics,” like math and reading that are important areas of learning. She prefers to just follow the children’s interests, but she feels that it is also important to keep some pace with the typical school environment, in case she and Paul ever want their children to return to school. To accomplish this goal, Lydia has had to work explicitly on certain subject areas with each of her children. Sometimes, she has been concerned that, because they typically follow their interests, some of these key areas might be weaker from lack of attention. There seems to be an inherent tension between the need for direct instruction in some curricular areas and the learning style that is espoused in this family, a style that highly values the philosophy ‘learning for learning sake’ and following interest.

Lydia particularly values the intensity of learning that can come so naturally to this style of education. Although the choice of path is flexible, this type of schooling can encourage a fairly intense approach to academic pursuit, in the guise of following

interest. Both Trisha and Lydia discuss the aspects of home schooling that they enjoy the most. Trisha describes how she can vanish into her room for several hours and read as much as she wants to. She elaborates about how she reads so much, that sometimes her parents remind her to come out of her room and do other things (TI). This scenario is particularly interesting, given the fact that Trisha had a lot of difficulty learning how to read and learned to do so at a very late age (TIM, TI). Yet, at this point, reading is a primary interest, and Trisha can devote a considerable amount of time to it.

Trisha also describes how she can choose to practice up to two hours certain days on her violin. She feels that the home schooling gives her a lot of freedom, which, in turn, allows her to focus intensively on the things that matter to her the most. Lydia describes this freedom as a means to choose the methods that allow her children to learn with focus and intensity. They will often spend considerable amounts of time on specific board games or computer games that focus on a specific topic area (e.g., *Monopoly* for math and *Settlers of Catan* for history), which, although not a traditional approach to schooling, allows for that intensity of academically engaged time that can be so productive for learning. Certainly, not all of Trisha's time is spent at an academically intense level (TIM, TH, TI) but, when that interest is there, intensity can be a healthy component of Trisha's education.

CHAPTER 6: RUTH

Ruth's World: Life and Values

As I drive to my first interview with this family, during a beautiful week typical for Eastern Ontario in September. I pull into the driveway of Ruth's home, and am presented by a lovely, mid-sized home surrounded by the park-like setting of their small acreage. I am greeted at the door by both Ruth and her sister, with their mother close behind. Ruth's father is away at work in the city. Their home seems pleasant and organized but in a lived-in, relaxed style. All family members are quietly polite and make me feel comfortable as I sit down in their kitchen to do the interview (RH; see Appendix D).

Ruth and her sister have obviously been at work on their school books. Ruth settles back into her books. She has a big selection of sharpened pencils, many with colour, which I am to learn is typical of her approach to school work: creative, structured, and organized. She is reading through her text with her mother, Barbara, in a seat beside her, ready to help out when needed thereby demonstrating another typical characteristic of Ruth's learning experience: consistent parental coaching. Her sister, Jenny, is stationed on the couch, also surrounded by school books, writing and working on various assignments. She continues to work away quietly the whole time I am there, without any extra help, only stopping now and again when the conversation is particularly engaging and she wants to join in (RH).

I soon begin my interview with Barbara and Ruth, as they describe their experiences with home schooling. "I would honestly say that home school is the best

thing that ever happened to us,” says Barbara (RBI). This family began home schooling when their oldest (Jenny) was in Grade 2 and Ruth was in Senior Kindergarten. At the time, the girls were attending a private Christian school. Although the family is Christian, they found that the social dynamics of this school, which revolved mostly around two churches of which they were not a part, was not as welcoming as it could have been for their girls. However, the most significant challenge was for Ruth, who could not function well enough to fit into a regular classroom. “She had a great teacher, a great class but she just couldn’t cope with going to school every day, she couldn’t cope with structure. ... I thought, you know, I’m going to destroy my child here” (RBI). At the time, Ruth’s parents did not realize the extent of Ruth’s learning disabilities but the patterns were disturbing enough that they had to do something. So, they brought the girls home to home school and have been doing so for eight years.

An academic emphasis is clearly a priority for this family (RBI). Barbara has spent considerable time and effort to access academic resources that are appropriate for both her children. She is clearly very organized and thorough with their curriculum choices. Their style of home schooling could best be described as ‘structured’ as they work their way through a variety of texts to accomplish the girls’ academic goals. When they show me the itemized work that Ruth has accomplished over the past year, I am quite impressed. Like most home schoolers (RIT), the girls are given a variety of educational and social opportunities through a home school co-op, through extra-curricular classes, and through activities at which the family works or volunteers. They provide an exceptional service to the community through their respite foster care work and by working at seniors’ homes. Ruth is fully involved in all these activities (RBI, RIT,

RC). As one of her co-op teachers reflects, “They are a wonderful family that she comes from. Her mother and sister are great people. I don’t know the father as well but they do such great things as a family, taking kids in like they do” (RIT).

One main focus of Ruth’s schooling has been to overcome the challenges presented by her learning disabilities. Ruth has been tested and diagnosed with dyslexia and with attention deficit and has a variety of other related difficulties. Barbara states that, as difficult as their educational journey has been, home schooling has been “really a good thing; ... I really don’t know where she would be in the school system right now, because I understand completely that you can’t give that kind of attention to one child in a classroom” (RBI). Barbara and Ruth have spent considerable time and money on testing, therapy, curriculum resources, and any tool that could help Ruth learn.

Ruth didn’t learn to read until she was in Grade 4. “She was tired all of the time, she couldn’t do anything for more than 20 minutes at a time” (RBI). The hardest part was the frustration and desperation, even anger, which accompanied all learning for Ruth. They were fully aware, as a family, that the stress level was high as they struggled to develop basic academic skills. Barbara has taken multiple courses and used multiple systems to help her child read and learn.

In the end, Ruth, with help from her mother, has accomplished a degree of success and now functions well in multiple environments (RIT, RBI, RC). One of her co-op teachers, who has taught her in a variety of classes in science and physical education, over a 3-year period, states that “you would never know that she had that level of learning disabilities now and she seems to have no social problems” (RIT). In his particular classes, he has never had to push her through formal, written evaluations where

her challenges would be more obvious. However, he feels that her general participation and activity level, socially and academically, have been very healthy within his classroom. Ruth, her family, and teachers are not insinuating that home schooling has ‘cured’ her disabilities, but they do feel that the home school environment has supported her well as she progressed through academic stages.

Ruth’s Social Context

Friendships and Social Networks

In the past, Ruth certainly has felt social pressure related to her learning disabilities. As her mother explains, “in the past, it was very hard for her to just fit into school or any learning environment because everything was such a struggle for her ... at school, she cried every day and night” (RBI). Ruth also echoes these challenges by saying that, even as she got older and wasn’t in school, “it was really hard, too, when I couldn’t read because my friends, especially, they’d be telling me about like their 200-page books they were reading” (RBI). These memories are obviously difficult for Ruth to talk about because, as I interview her, she appears almost tearful, as she reflects on the stress of working through the challenges of her learning disabilities.

Despite these challenges, Ruth has become involved in a wide variety of social and work/volunteer activities. Socially, Barbara describes Ruth as a gentle personality, a peace-maker who is very sensitive to other people. While this sensitivity can make Ruth’s social life difficult in intense or critical environments, it has also meant that she works well with an eclectic group of people within a wide variety of age groups. Her social network is broad but also quite meaningful because she sees different groups of people on

a regular (usually weekly) basis over the course of a year or several years. Barbara jokes that “some weeks it feels like we are hardly home, we are involved in so many things ... we have to work hard to keep our schedule available for school work at home” (RBI). These different activities vary widely in geographical location and in type of focus so Ruth’s social life does not tend to overlap from one group to another, making her selection of friends quite extensive.

Ruth describes her social life as it unfolds through the week (RBI, RC). On Sunday, she has her church friends where she is just as popular with the seniors and young children as she is with her peer group. On Monday, she has her home school co-op, which involves a day with her peer group, participating in social and academic activities. On Monday nights, they meet with friends from a range of families with children of all ages called ‘Family Night’. This activity can best be described as a cross between a Bible study and social time/activities. On Thursday, after school (because many of the children are schooled in standard schools), she spends time with her quizzing friends. On a variety of weekdays, she volunteers at a seniors’ centre where she is as popular with the seniors as she is at church. To top off the week, the whole family often works with young babies who are in the foster care system and need respite care due to complicated health problems. Ruth is fully involved in the care of these children and has worked with some challenging babies.

When asked about her favourite groups of friends, Ruth claims that she enjoys all of them but that her ‘quizzing’ friends are probably her favourite. Quizzing is a competitive activity where teams compete against each other in quizzes about a myriad of topics, a cross among Trivial Pursuit, Jeopardy, and Reach for the Top. Ruth has known

this group of friends for a long time plus she talks about how she has travelled with them, which makes them all closer to each other. She says, “it’s fun, it’s exciting because at a meet, there are hundreds of people, you know, there’s 150 quizzers and coaches ... and we all get to travel on a coach together to Toronto and other places” (RBI). Although Ruth’s quizzing friends are probably her favourite, she enjoys all the different groups with which she is involved. She also talks extensively about the home school co-op, clearly a significant part of her social life (RBI, RC, RIT).

Ruth’s home school co-op consists of a structured program of academic subjects, physical education classes/events, and social interactions with a peer group. It is organized by the parents but they often hire teachers to teach specific subject areas. The classes run once a week for 10 weeks in the fall and another 10 weeks in the spring. Other activities are organized separately and may occur throughout the year. The group of which Ruth is a part consists of about 20 students and is an excellent source of friends within her peer group (ages 10-13) that she can see quite regularly. As well, many of these children will go on to participate in the high school co-op, which is organized along similar lines but is only for students aged 14-18. The co-op gives these home school students the opportunity to experience social networks that are similar to the school environment, without giving up the advantages of the home school (RIT, RBI, RC).

The Role of Interest and Context in Social Engagement

For Ruth, any activity whether it be academic, extra-curricular, or primarily social, is initially very difficult as a result of her learning challenges, which not only affect her academically but in other ways as well (RBI). As Barbara states early in our conversation, although home schooling did not solve all these problems, the home school

context and the *interests* that Ruth has been able to develop through home schooling, have made a big difference in her overall development as a person.

One of the teachers of the co-op is a retired teacher from a large high school. He has also taught in smaller schools and is now working within the context of the home school co-op. He comments on how supportive the students are with each other and how they have such fun together. Ruth's group is very keen to learn at the co-op, so he enjoys working with their level of enthusiasm. "They seem to feel such a good level of confidence" (RIT). Ruth "fits in very naturally, and shows much confidence" (RIT). Certainly, when I am observing, there is no doubt that Ruth enjoys her time there. Occasionally, when the class gets more intense academically, she exhibits signs of fatigue but, in any kind of group situation, such as quizzing or during recess or during phys ed., she is very engaged socially (RC).

Ruth's social development and personal character are seen in terms of: sensitivity to others, peacemaker, confidence, joviality, and the ability to 'go with the flow' and 'to get along with others' (RIT, RBI, RC). "Ruth has very good social skills, fits in well with other kids, very jovial and positive ... this has something to do with being home schooled in such a wonderful family" (RIT). Ruth and the home schooled children are able to be selective about their social environments. The environments are more varied, with the time frame of participation being often less intense and based more on interest (RIT). For instance, in Ruth's co-op, the students only see each other once a week so, although it is a regular social experience, they don't have to spend most of their social life with the same group of people.

Ruth, with her learning disabilities, might be overwhelmed in an academic environment where her weaknesses are at the forefront as in a traditional school environment (RBI, RIT). Home schooling, on the other hand, affords her the opportunity to engage in environments where her confidence level and self-esteem can be encouraged. Ruth's emotional and social security level is high because she most often finds herself in positive social environments, as selected by her and her family, that promote her interests and her skills in a supportive and non-threatening manner, rather than emphasizing her weaknesses or forcing her to face daily the negative effects of peer pressure from the same group of people (RC, RO, RIT, RBI).

Interest plays a fundamental, although not the only, role in the selection of activities for Ruth. For instance, in the family group or in the home school co-op, interest is part of the selection process, but it is done at a group level and may not always engage Ruth's full interest level. However, interest does play a central role in some selection of activity. Ruth has a strong interest in working with people and could be described as a 'people person' (RC, RH). Her central interest involves working with people or in an activity that involves participation with groups of people. Her sensitivity to others, her joviality, and her desire to unify the people around her make her particularly suitable for working with others (RBI, RIT).

Ruth regularly volunteers at a seniors' home, committing considerable amounts of time to this pursuit. Some of the seniors with whom she works are quite disabled, which makes engagement with them particularly difficult. Yet Ruth is able to make connections with them that are mature beyond her years (RBI). She is popular with seniors everywhere she goes. Her mother mentions, "She is so good with working with seniors at

our church, I mean they all seek her out” (RBI). Indeed Ruth is good with all people who have special needs. Both she and her mother talk about the time they spend with the babies that come to them through the foster system for care. These babies require lots of extra attention. According to her mother, Ruth could easily find herself in a career working with youth or the elderly: “the babies and the elderly she just seems to be really good with ... she could either do something in early childhood development or something you know, supporting elder care” (RBI).

Ruth’s interest in quizzing revolves around the fun of travelling, of participating on a competitive team, and on the activity itself, which is based around oral quizzing (RBI). The oral/auditory characteristic may be a healthy outlet for an intelligent mind that is so often frustrated by the limitations of reading and writing. She can express herself in the areas that display her academic strengths rather than her weaknesses (RC, RH). As well, the social nature of this activity is one of the attractions for Ruth. She is able to engage socially and academically with her peer group in a competitive activity where she can achieve and be successful.

Finally, the last area of interest involves creative design. Ruth does this activity in a less formal way. Rather, it is intertwined with all her activities as she chooses to engage in her school and extra-curricular work in a visually creative and interesting manner. “Like I [Barbara] said, she would be good at interior decorating, from the time she was very little, everything had to match, everything had to be in a certain way, you know” (RBI). Although this is not an area that Ruth developed through extensive formal classes, visual design forms a continuous counterpoint in her daily life, an interest that she intends to explore further in the future.

Ruth's Academic Context

Academic Individualization: A Customized Education

Ruth's family highly values the skills that are necessary for academic success (RBI, RIT, RH, RC). Barbara spends considerable time during the interview discussing the academic approach she has used with both her girls. She has obviously put a lot of time, thought, and money into the academic endeavours of her children (RBI, RH). While this has been a relatively straight forward process with her elder daughter, the academic journey has been more complicated for Ruth's schooling. Despite the challenges, Barbara has continuously sought out a highly individualized, customized approach for her children. Barbara and Ruth have made extensive searches into different types of curriculum, instruction, and therapies to meet Ruth's needs.

The academic tension arises from Ruth's intelligence and interest to absorb tremendous amounts of material juxtaposed with her inability to do work in the traditional way most often preferred in any kind of schooling environment, home school or otherwise. She also struggles to output the information in a typical school format. As Barbara states, "she couldn't read but she had this huge mind for ideas ... she could tell you all sorts of facts and interesting things, wonderful stories, but formal output was such a struggle" (RBI). Ruth herself explains, "I was reading a story last week, I got the words, I tried, I focused on a word and I'd read the words and stuff, but then I didn't get the story, I got detached words" (RBI). The continuous challenge is to find materials, instruction, and/or therapy that would allow Ruth to use her intelligence, to learn new material, and to express herself in a manner that is compatible with her ability level.

Barbara has been dedicated to meeting the educational needs of both her daughters. In essence, she became an expert in the areas of education that were necessary to teach Ruth. If she was not capable of meeting Ruth's instructional needs, she hired therapists or tutors, or enrolled Ruth in courses that would meet those needs. Throughout the process, there has always been an attitude of doing whatever it takes to surmount the learning challenges and ultimately teach Ruth the skills she needs for academic success.

Although, the home learning environment in this household is quite structured, there is always the attempt to find a balance between a healthy structure and over-structure. During the interview, we discuss the use of timers, lists, and period allocation for specific activities. Sometimes, a heavy structure is helpful and, at other times, there is a need for more flexibility. As Barbara says, "it changes regularly because I've tried the 'list idea' in the past and then I get negative reactions to that and then, you know, Ruth's gone through phases where she's wanting me to write down everything" (RBI). Ruth responds, "I don't like it when she writes down a list like that, I like it when she writes down the amount of time I need for each activity ... because I dawdle too much when I don't have the times set" (RBI). Whatever micro-approach they use to organize their days, there is a fairly high level of structure to their academic pursuits.

Barbara would consider herself the supervisor, organizer, and instructor/coach of most activities within the house. She is available to assist and teach her children their curriculum as needed and spends considerable amounts of time in one-on-one instruction sessions with Ruth. Barbara has itemized the subjects that the girls have studied and the books they have read. She can demonstrate the courses and materials that they have covered over the past year of Ruth's schooling. The list is quite extensive and an

impressive amount of material has been read and studied, given Ruth's academic challenges. The pursuit of education at home is quite organized and thorough.

There is a strong distinction between academic pursuit within the household and activities that take place outside of the house, which can be both academic and non-academic in nature (RC, RH). Barbara's children receive instruction and pursue academic activities outside of their home that are complementary to the activities done at home. Both Ruth and her sister have taken in-class courses organized for home schoolers as well as online courses through private and publicly funded schools. As well, they are active in their home school co-op. The home school co-op is not meant to replace the at-home instruction but, rather, is seen by most parents involved, as a way to enrich their children's academic pursuits (RIT, RC). Some activities are best learned in a group or small-group environment, and the home school co-op is organized to focus on those activities. For instance, general physical education, particularly instruction in team sports, is one of the regular classes at the co-op. As well, certain types of science activities that are more enjoyable in varied groups and environments are explored. Drama presentations are an annual event, and students participate in choir regularly. The activities are interest-focused and are not marked or based on grade levels because every effort is made to keep the students excited by learning while doing subject areas that they might not necessarily be able to do at home (RIT, RC). Judging by the level of enthusiasm and the depth of discussions in the room, Ruth and her fellow students enjoy their time and are reaping healthy academic benefits from the weekly co-op (RC).

Academic Individualization: Characteristics of Instruction

Ruth's mother has provided qualities of instruction that are vital for children who are learning with disabilities. Barbara's main goal has been to do "what needed to be done" but, through that framework, she has provided the key elements of instruction that are necessary for Ruth's learning: emotional and cognitive support, explicit instruction, and intense instruction. Through the intersection of the qualities of instruction, combined with the one-on-one instruction of the home environment, Ruth's learning environment is focused, intense, explicit, systematic, and supportive.

By most definitions, Ruth's schooling could be described as academically intense: the level of increased repetition, expectations of focus, and academic engaged time (AET) are significant components of her schooling approach (RH, RC, RBI). In her home school co-op, which is similar to a typical classroom environment, Ruth often loses focus or intensity by 'tuning out' when the subject matter gets more difficult for her or by getting up to go to the washroom, yawning, or engaging in doodling or some other side pursuit that does not involve the subject matter.

At home, it is a different matter, as her mother is able to keep Ruth on task and engage her in the instructional material through discussion and by reading to her directly so that she understands. As well, Barbara presents Ruth with material that is inherently more interesting to her. In other words, the highly customized coaching, instruction, and curriculum at home, organized by her mother, are able to keep Ruth engaged and intensely focused on the subject matter at hand, for longer periods of time than she could maintain in a classroom environment.

Appropriate curriculum is vital to Ruth's ability to focus and intensely participate in her academic subjects (RBI). For instance, due to Ruth's reading challenges, Ruth and Barbara have sought out math material that has what Barbara describes as "the clarity of the screen" (RBI) in which the material is presented in a clean and clear format with little distraction. Barbara has found a few math curricula over the years that contain minimal visual distraction of pictures or frequent change of font or complicated graphics, etc., all of which would make Ruth's focus on the math more difficult.

Another example is Barbara's choice of spelling programs, a choice that is made extremely complicated because spelling remains at the core of Ruth's learning disabilities. In the end they found a program that intensely and repetitively emphasizes words with the same root in a systematic manner. This approach allows Ruth to make cognitive connections between words. The repetition is frequent enough that she can remember the spelling more accurately.

Probably the most complicated and extensive curriculum journey, undertaken by this family, was the search for reading materials. Many methods for reading were researched, bought, used, and discarded when, yet again, Ruth was not able to develop the ability to read or even begin to de-code the words that were so necessary for early reading development. When Ruth and Barbara describe their attempts to get Ruth to read, their conversation becomes quite emotional. It was obviously a struggle. Only after extensive search and consultation with recognized consultants and experts in the field were they able to use a system that was explicit, systematic, and intense. The method also used multiple modes of delivery and multi-sensory approaches for increased repetition of material and increased opportunity for understanding. As Barbara describes, "it's one-on-

one, very intensive and specific, and you do the same things every day with letters, flashcards, with, you know, having to draw things big making pictures for prepositions, etc.” (RBI). Only after using this system was Ruth able to begin reading in a systematic and successful manner.

The level of emotional and cognitive support in the delivery of Ruth’s education is consistently high. Ruth’s educational journey has obviously been a challenge, but there has been every attempt to encourage her, to lessen her frustrations, and to support her as she has negotiated the complicated path towards stronger academic skills. Ruth is often ‘pushed’ and encouraged to move on to the next step of learning. It would be so much easier to just accommodate her needs and to let her only do what she is capable of doing easily. However, Barbara constantly seeks ways to push Ruth to the next level and to keep her motivated and on task. One of the more touching moments in the interview occurs when Ruth looks close to tears as she discusses a more difficult moment in her educational journey, and her mom steps in to hug her and say, “you know, Ruth is who she is and we love her just the way she is” (RBI).

Ultimately, it is the cognitive support that achieves the high academic standards that Barbara and Ruth set for themselves. Both girls in this family have studied an impressive array of subjects and materials. Ruth is no exception to this standard and she has read or, more often, has had read to her a huge amount of books. Due to Ruth’s reading challenges, her mother has spent a considerable amount of time reading to her so that she doesn’t miss out on the opportunities for learning that come from reading. She has also used audio technology to ‘read’ certain books, but Barbara says much of their school time has been spent with Barbara reading text for Ruth and reducing, adjusting,

and modifying the text so that Ruth can be encouraged to read it herself. Once Ruth has read the text herself, Barbara encourages her to understand what she just read since, for Ruth, comprehension does not come easily when she is the reader.

All in all, Barbara spends considerable time ‘scaffolding’ Ruth’s learning experience so that she can get the most from everything that she studies: “She is good at pulling information when I read to her and she’s always had a very good vocabulary from me reading, so she doesn’t mind [difficult text] too much” (RBI). Ruth reflects this comment by saying, “I know it sounds funny to say I like details, but I like it when books give you details about the time period, the history and all the stuff that describes what is going on at that time” (RBI). Barbara and Ruth make a good team as they work through Ruth’s educational journey. Barbara has provided Ruth with the tools, discipline, and skill and a tremendous gift of time that is required for a productive educational journey. It has frequently been a difficult journey but, as Barbara states on several occasions, “home schooling is the best thing that ever happened to us” (RBI).

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION

The World of Melissa, Trisha, and Ruth: Life and Values

The three students represented in this thesis fit comfortably into the demographics typically outlined in academic literature about home schooling (Canadian Centre for Home Education, 2003; Lines, 1994; McDowell et al., 2000; Ray, 1999). The students were from two-parent Caucasian middle class families with the main income coming from the father. Each had 1-3 siblings. As in many home schooled families, the mother was the main teaching parent. Although the fathers were a supportive influence and regular participants in the process, the majority of the day-to-day activities of home schooling were guided by the mothers.

The students came from rural areas in Eastern Ontario within an hour's driving distance from a major city, a characteristic that is statistically quite common in Ontario, according to home school networks (RBI, RIT). Two of the families had a parent who commuted daily into the city, while one family had a parent who was self-employed and worked closer to home. As well, all three students were adolescent girls (ranging in age from 13 -17). My initial research design did not intend to focus on adolescents but, through the selection process, these were the students who met the criteria.

Not that any of these students and their families could fit neatly into a statistical box or be conveniently described by a single category. After all, home schooling is an education of choice, of customization, and of individualization. As Canadian researchers Davies and Aurini (2003) stated, most home school families frame their desire to home school in the language of rights: the rights to choose that which is best for their family

and its unique needs. Arai (2000) also felt that most Canadian home schoolers based their decision to home school to meet the unique needs of their children as much as on the home school philosophy. People choose to home school for a wide variety of reasons and their reasons often include a mixture of practical, spiritual, and pedagogical principles, although spiritual and religious reasons seem to be more pre-dominant in the U.S. than they are in Canada (Canadian Centre for Home Education, 2003; Ray, 1999).

These three families chose to home school for a variety of reasons. Two of the families initially tried other forms of schooling for their children. Trisha was first placed in a rural public school, and the experience was so negative that she was quickly pulled out of the school. Ruth was in a Christian, private school, which was considered a ‘good’ school by her parents, but Ruth struggled hugely to adjust to that environment. Melissa’s family, on the other hand, always intended to home school and Melissa has never participated in another form of schooling. Despite their varied beginnings, all three families expressed unwavering support of their decision to home school. Barbara (Ruth’s mother) declared that it “was the best thing that has ever happened to us” (RBI). For Lucie (Trisha’s mother), “my whole philosophy of learning is different than school” (TIM). As Melissa’s mother (Lydia) indicated, “home schooling is something that they would do, no matter what” (LI).

Despite their unanimous support for home schooling, the families continued home schooling for different reasons. Surprisingly enough, given that all three girls had learning disabilities, the disabilities were not the main reason. All three families expressed a level of respect for the school system but strongly believed that school could not provide the same level of education they could provide for their children through

home schooling. Home schooling offered numerous advantages through the opportunities to customize and individualize programs for their children.

Lydia believed that the ability to follow children's interests as a driving force in their education was paramount to her desire to get her children engaged in their learning. Barbara felt that home schooling was best able to meet the unique needs of both her daughters and that the intensive one-on-one education they received was critical to their learning process: "I completely understand that you can't give that kind of attention to one child in a classroom" (RBI). Lucie emphasized the sense of 'mission' that she felt to home school her daughter with multiple special needs. This perspective stemmed from her strong religious beliefs that God gave her a child who needed extra attention and, although she would home school her children regardless of their ability level, home schooling was the best opportunity for her child: "You, the parent, know your child better than anyone on earth, your home is a loving place and you are equipped because God is the one who equips" (LI).

Although the families did not specifically home school to address the challenges of learning disabilities, home schooling had been particularly beneficial to addressing the unique needs of their children's learning disabilities. All three families had spent considerable time, money, and effort to determine the nature of their children's challenges and an educational approach that was most suitable to their children's learning needs in tandem with considerable day-to-day effort in working with their children to help them overcome their challenges. Their situations were consistent with the research that has been done on families who home school children with learning disabilities (Duffey, 2002; Duvall et al., 1997, 2004; Ensign, 2000; Knowles et al., 2004). Duffey

(2002) described how the mother-teachers of these children were highly educated with respect to their children's disabilities, while Duvall and colleagues (1997) showed how the parents of these children "successfully engaged students at higher rates than those accomplished by special educators in public school classrooms" (p. 157). Knowles et al. (2004) supported the home school environment as "a place where [specialized] pedagogies might be employed and where the special needs of these children may be better met" (p. 241).

Despite the commonalities across the families, there was diversity in their approach to education. At one end of the spectrum is the 'unschooling' approach, which involves an informal, lifestyle- and interest-driven approach to learning; at the other end of the spectrum is the 'school-at-home' approach, which looks very similar to conventional school transplanted to a home environment. Naturally, there are many 'shades of grey' between these two extremes with most home schoolers employing a combination of suitable methods (Lines, 1994; Ray, 1994, 1999; McDowell et al., 2000; Medlin, 2000).

The families represented a variety of approaches within this spectrum. Trisha was mostly home schooled in an 'unschooling' approach. Her learning was driven by interest-based activities, and her schedule followed the natural pattern of her learning interests. However, even though unschooling was the primary philosophy in her home, her mother had established more structured routines and textbooks for certain core subjects such as math and reading. Ruth, on the other hand, used a more 'school-at-home' approach. Her school days were organized by subject matter and the time that it took to learn each subject. Her learning was quite structured, although some degree of flexibility for interest

and for ability level was taken into consideration to best meet her unique needs. Melissa's schooling life would be described in home schooling circles as an 'eclectic home schooler', meaning that her family employed a variety of activities and approaches to meet her needs. According to Lucie, her mother, their approach to home schooling was much more 'school-at-home' when she was younger but, as she had grown older, they have tried to use a variety of home and outside resources. Some of these activities were more therapeutic in nature; some social, some artistic, and some academic with the schedule organized accordingly.

The Social Context

Friendships and Social Networks

Children with learning disabilities tend to struggle with social skill deficits and social dysfunction (Hutchinson et al., 2004; Kavale & Forness, 1996; Pearl & Donahue, 2004; Vaughn et al., 2001; Wiener, 2002; Zigmond & Baker, 1996). The same cognitive deficits that affect these children in their academic subjects impact many of their social interactions. Multiple studies have described this process as a deficit in social cognition (Bryan et al., 1989; Hutchinson et al., 2004; Meadan & Halle, 2004; Pavri & Luftig, 2000; Pearl et al., 1991; Roberts, Pratt, & Leach, 1991) or as a social information processing dysfunction (Elias, 2004; Hutchinson et al., 2004; Tur-Kaspa, 2002). Either way, the unfortunate impact that these challenges have on students with LD can leave them feeling lonely, alienated, and with poor self-concept through their diminished social status especially among their peers. For students with LD, the impact of social dysfunction may cause more pain and frustration than the challenges they deal with in

their academic work (Kavale & Forness, 1996; Meadan & Halle, 2004; Pearl & Donahue, 2004). Traditional school settings often pose a significant challenge for participation and inclusion for these students (Estell et al., 2008; Roberts et al., 1991; Testerman, 1996).

All three of these students have struggled with social challenges as a direct result of their learning disabilities. Melissa, in particular, had been significantly affected by social challenges, possibly due to the complex nature of her learning disabilities, which, combined with her physical challenges, created more barriers than children with less complex disabilities. This view is reflected in the studies by Martinez (2006), Tur-Kaspa (2002), and Wiener (2002) who demonstrated that students with multiple disabilities or co-morbidity of disabilities were more likely to be severely challenged by social cognition deficits. Melissa had significant deficits in social cognition, which were particularly apparent when she was interacting with her peer group. Although she was a friendly, talkative, and outgoing young woman, particularly when socializing one-on-one, she really struggled to integrate socially with people her own age (MIVT, MO, MI, LI). Although she had had many opportunities to be with people of her own age in various activities (in youth group, in church, etc.), she had not found those environments to be satisfying socially. As Melissa's mother stated, "there are a lot of barriers ... I think it is the physical but it is also the learning disability, the cognitive ... because in a group, they are talking about things and Melissa is just not able to keep up" (LI).

Ruth and her mother, Barbara, expressed similar concerns with Ruth's ability to integrate with her peer group (RBI). As Barbara stated: "In the past, it was very hard for her to just fit into school or any learning environment because everything was such a struggle" (RBI). Ruth echoed this frustration and embarrassment; "it was really hard, too

when I couldn't read because my friends, they'd be telling me about like their 200-page books they were reading" (RBI). Ruth and her mother conveyed the difficulty of trying to fit into a peer group when the deficits, both social and academic, become more obvious in comparison to same-aged students. While Ruth had some personality traits that were valuable in certain social settings, she still experienced frustration when she had to 'keep pace' with her peers.

Trisha did not directly express or discuss any challenges with her peer group but did convey a certain degree of loneliness and a desire to have more friends within her peer group. This point of view might be as a result of her location, as there seemed to be a lack of home schoolers in the area. However, it might be also an inability to connect easily with peers, when they were available. Certainly during observation periods, Trisha seemed to relate well to adults in her environment, but she did not immediately gravitate to the limited number of people her own age. Her characteristics of maturity, serenity, and a sense of calm are all valuable characteristics in certain social environments but perhaps not so much in the adolescent population with which she might want to connect.

Still all three of these girls had personality/character traits that were invaluable when dealing with a broader social network of people. The mothers of these girls all said that their children related well to seniors, adults, and children in various social settings. Melissa and Ruth, in particular, were particularly gifted in dealing with seniors and young children, to the extent that they were quite popular with this age group in social settings such as church. They worked with this age group and were considering opportunities for future careers while working with seniors or young children. In the case

of Trisha, age was less relevant to her choice of friends, with many of them family friends who came her way through multi-age family activities.

A number of studies on the social lives of home schooled children have described how these students have an equally extensive network of people in their lives (often of mixed-age groups) as schooled children and a similar number of friends but that the nature of the social network is different from typically schooled peers (Chatham-Carpenter, 1994; Gathercole, 2007; Medlin, 2000; McDowell, 2004; Ray, 1994, 1999; Rivero, 2008; Rudner, 1998). The social lives of the adolescent girls in this thesis were similar to those described in other home school studies. In fact, given their learning disabilities and the accompanying social deficits, home schooling might well have afforded them the opportunity to have a broader social network adapted to their particular social gifts and abilities. Supportive social networks are vitally important to the social well-being of all people (Hutchinson et al., 2004; Martinez, 2006; Vaughn et al., 2001; Wiener, 2002). As well, in various studies on friendship, it has been expressed that a select number of close friendships are vital to the mental health and well-being of students (Pearl & Donahue, 2004; Martinez, 2006; Vaughn & Elbaum, 1999). However, in a conventional school setting, students with learning disabilities are often at a disadvantage because they are not able to maintain a high level of status amongst their peers due to cognitive deficits, even though they are surrounded by peers (Kavale & Forness, 1996; Stone & La Greca, 2004; Pearl & Donahue, 2004).

Socialization is typically described as the process whereby people acquire rules and behaviour systems, values, and beliefs that equip them to function effectively in their society (Arnett, 2007; Durkin, 1995; Rose, 2002). The social lives of these girls, along

with other home schoolers, looked a little different from schooled children but that does not mean that they were socially illiterate, inadequately socialized, or lacking healthy opportunities for friendship and social networking. These girls had acquired social skills and the necessary behaviour, values, and beliefs that were required of them to function in our society. They had friends of all ages and friends their own age. They had an extensive social network. Due to their learning disabilities, they might have struggled with some level of social deficit but, to the best of their ability, associating with an appropriate quantity and quality of people, they had carved out a social life that was healthy and worked for them.

The Role of Interest and Context in Social Engagement

Many friendships and social networks are formed around the commonalities of interest. Children are more likely to relate well to each other if they have interests in common (Farmer & Farmer, 1996; Farmer et al., 1996; Freeman et al., 2004; Hutchinson et al., 2004; Pearl & Donahue, 2004). These connections, in turn, promote the benefits of friendships and social networks. “Students with learning disabilities, who are not typically strong academically, tend to have stronger social lives if they have significant interests, which may focus their social lives on others who share the same enthusiasm” (Pearl & Donahue, 2004, p. 156). As well, Freeman et al. (2004) demonstrated that adults who had LD felt that, during their school years, interests shared with their peers played a strong role in giving them resilience against their challenges.

A series of large scale studies as well as smaller studies have examined the role and the nature of extra-curricular activity level in Canadian and American populations of home schoolers (Kelley, 1991; Mayberry et al., 1995; Ray, 1994, 1999; Ray & Wartes,

1994; Rudner, 1998; Shyers, 1992). Home schoolers are consistently involved in a wide variety of activities with a variety of people, from peers to adults, outside of their homes. These activities range from sports to music classes, Sunday school to informal play activities, as well as group academic classes. On average, the students spend 12 hours a week with non-sibling children in chosen activities. These children are clearly not isolated from social opportunities with most of these activities revolving around and specifically chosen for areas of interest.

Most of the three girls' social lives revolved around areas of interest. These interest-based activities, while typically described as 'extra-curricular' when discussed in a traditional school setting, were really 'part and parcel' of their everyday educational and social lives. Home schoolers, as a group, do not tend to differentiate between 'curricular' and 'extra-curricular' subjects as all activities are chosen with the idea of educating and enriching the lives of the students in various formats (Davies & Aurini, 2003; Ray, 1999; Rivero, 2008). As in the case of Trisha's family, who self-described themselves as unschoolers, the interchange of interests and the involvement in those interests was considered a seamless flow of educational activity. In the case of a more structured home schooling family such as Ruth's, there was a continuum of activity from the more academically involved pursuits to the less academic interests at home and outside of home. Nevertheless, all these activities were driven around interest and were considered important. The resulting social benefits derived naturally from the outpouring of this pursuit of interest, particularly when interests took the students outside of their home and family.

As an example, Melissa, who was inherently challenged by multiple physical and cognitive barriers, was able to derive some of her best social connections from dance classes and activities. In some ways, the dance class became a culmination of all her interests. Dance had become a tool that allowed her to be engaged with people, at the audience level, but also with her fellow performers. In a sense, this dance troupe created a peer group for her that was not paralleled in any other social situation.

Ruth also had participated in a variety of interests and social settings outside her home environment: home school co-op, Bible study, youth groups at church, a seniors' home, and foster care for young babies. She had been involved in music, riding, swimming, and many other activities in the past. These engagements have brought about many social networks and friendships but, in our conversations, Ruth emphasized that her quizzing friends were the ones that she enjoyed the most and that quizzing was where she had the most fun. Perhaps the skill and ability that she brought to the activity allowed Ruth to have extra confidence while dealing with her peers.

Due to the flexible nature of home schooling, Trisha was able to spend a considerable portion of her day pursuing her current interests in the areas of reading, music, and dog showing/handling, along with other things in which she participated in the past such as basketball, swimming, home school co-op, art projects, games, theatre, and more. Music, in particular, had become a significant interest of Trisha's life, and she devoted much time to practicing at home and participating in musical activities in orchestra, fiddling, and other groups. Music had given her multiple social contacts with her community and, perhaps more importantly, a sense of confidence and a strong self-

esteem because she was achieving a high level of accomplishment through her devotion to this activity.

Overall, all three families expressed a belief that the home schooling context was very healthy for the social lives of their children. The mothers of these girls discussed how they felt that the individualized and selective nature of the social activities of their daughters allowed them to choose activities that emphasized their interests and strengths. In turn, this choice of activities allowed the girls to feel confidence and security in their environment as they developed friendships and explored social networks. Typically, the social networks were based around interests so that commonalities existed, encouraging friendships to form. That is not to say that the girls did not meet with adversity in their social lives. All three girls discussed frustrations with friendships, trying to ‘fit in’ with youth groups, and overcoming some of their learning issues and the consequent effects on their confidence and negotiation with peers. However, overall, they had enough and varied opportunities to seek healthy friendships and to feel a strong sense of belonging in some activity or another. As one of Ruth’s teachers stated: “The students are very comfortable with whom they are, so supportive of each other and they have such fun together. They are keen to learn and work with a good level of enthusiasm ... and feel such a good level of confidence” (RIT).

The Academic Context

Academic Individualization: A Customized Education

At the core of all home school environments is a customized approach to education (Arai, 2000; Davies & Aurini, 2003; Knowles et al., 1994; Rivero, 2008).

Davies and Aurini interviewed 75 home schooling families within Ontario and described the common denominator among all home schooling families, regardless of pedagogical or ideological background, was a demand for ‘choice’ as a way to depart from the larger, ‘one best system’ of public school boards. Home schooling, by its very nature, is a customized and individualized approach to education.

Studies on home schoolers have described how parents felt that customizing their children’s education becomes critical when dealing with students who have learning disabilities (e.g., Duffey, 2002; Ensign, 2000; Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010; Rivero, 2008). As Rivero argued, “perhaps most important, each home schooled child – regardless of labels or diagnoses – can be given an education tailored to his or her needs” (p. 42).

Without exception, the three families in this research stated that the ability to customize and individualize was fundamental to their approach as they educated their children. While this ability was important in their approach to all their children, it was absolutely critical when they educated their child with learning disabilities. Essentially, establishing an individualized and unique program for their child, that suited her specific needs and interests, was the underlying drive that motivated most of the educational programming in the three families. For example, Barbara talked about how Ruth had a “huge mind for ideas but that she needed an individualized, specific approach ... I just did whatever had to be done to make it work” (RBI). Lucie stated that her motto became “necessity is the mother of all invention: everything we did needed modification to some degree ... we just found a way” (LI). Trisha’s mother, Lydia, did “whatever works to keep her interested in learning” (TIM).

All three families had high academic standards and expectations for their children as they developed their educational journey. Ruth's and Melissa's families, in particular, were quite driven to provide a rigorous academic environment while, at the same time, keeping their children motivated through appropriate educational approaches suitable for their disabilities. Barbara and Lucie discussed at length how important it was for their children to explore in depth many critical subject areas. The girls had extensive reading lists, had explored a wide variety of topics in science and history, and had gone through extensive training in math, to the best of their abilities. There was an underlying thread of tension between expectations and aptitude that called for a continuous re-adjustment of learning methods but, in the end, the girls seemed to benefit significantly from their demanding programs. Melissa's independence worker (who had worked with many other students with similar disabilities) stated that Melissa had benefited tremendously from home schooling in an academic sense. She felt that Melissa had done so many things that were interesting and had learned considerably more than she would have done in any other learning environment.

Trisha's mother also had high academic expectations for her children but her primary driving factor in customizing their activities was to let "their interests lead the way" (LI). She felt that the role of interest was critical in the development of Trisha's academic pursuits. For example, Trisha's skills in biology and reading were both highly developed because she had a keen interest in some topics that drove her to develop those skills, despite her challenges to learn. The role of interest was also important for the other two families but less of a driving force. All three families did work hard to provide interesting curriculum and activities so that their children could learn but, in Trisha's

case, learning was primarily interest-led, whereas in the other two families it was one of several considerations in the development of their customized education. This finding is consistent with a study (of 100 home schooling families over 9 years) done by Ensign (2000) where she found that the role of interest played a significant role in the customization of curriculum for children with LD or giftedness. Like these families, sometimes interest was the main driving force in educational choice and, at other times, it simply played an important role.

Perhaps the level of structure in these different families is reflected in their different philosophies towards education. While all sought unique programs for their children, Ruth's family and Melissa's family were more focused on structure, planning, and organization than Trisha's family. The level of structure did create some interesting dynamics within these families. In a sense, the higher the level of structure, the higher the level of tension, particularly as these families dealt with children with learning disabilities. Ruth's and Melissa's families discussed how they often felt overwhelmed to "get it all done" (LI, RBI) or how they had struggled to meet their self-imposed expectations as well as the expectations of their peer group and family members. Both families talked about how other home schoolers seemed to get so much done and achieved so much, which left them feeling inadequate at times, as they struggled to work with children who were challenged by learning disabilities.

Certainly, there have been several large-scale studies that have shown very high levels of academic achievement among students who home school (Ray, 1994, 1999, 2000; Rudner, 1998) and perhaps the peer pressure from other home schoolers plays a role. As well, the choice to home school in the first place is generally met with skepticism

from society (Gathercole, 2007; Guterson, 1992; Rivero, 2008), which puts teacher-parents on the defensive, particularly when the child being educated does not perform easily in an academic sense. Trisha's family did not seem to feel this pressure as much. Her educational journey was not driven by grades or subjects, which created a more relaxed educational environment for the children, particularly for a child who was challenged with learning disabilities.

One of the distinguishing features of home education that differentiates this educational environment from other educational environments is the high use of one-on-one or tutorial-style instruction. In fact, the low teacher-student ratio is a feature that is most prominent in the academic lives of the students represented in this thesis. Research on the learning needs of students with LD states emphatically that one-on-one or tutorial style of education is critical to the academic progress of students with LD (Butler et al., 2000; Dowds & Hess, 1996; Elbaum et al., 2000; Erion, 2006; Rivero, 2008). Since the home school environment is rich in opportunities for tutorial and one-on-one delivery of instruction, home schooling is potentially of significant value as an educational model for students with learning disabilities. Erion's (2006) meta-analysis examined the effectiveness of parent tutoring in 37 studies across grade level, across various skill areas, and with various parent teaching features (modelling, supervised practice, written instructions, consultation, etc.). The results were overwhelmingly in support of parent tutoring as an effective means of improving the academic skills of children. While Erion was not focusing specifically on parents who were tutoring in the context of home schooling, his research points to the potential resource for using parents for instruction through tutorial style delivery.

The families in this thesis talked extensively about their use of one-on-one instructional delivery. All the mothers (parent-teachers) described their role as coach, tutor, assistant, and teacher and how they spent many, many hours sitting next to their children working through the various subjects and areas of skill acquisition. The mothers all claimed that they found that this role (as tutor and coach) was more vital with their children who had learning disabilities, with even more time committed to these children to help them acquire necessary academic skills. As Barbara described, “all my time has been spent sitting beside her, helping her, coaching her, and guiding her through many steps along the way” (RBI).

This intensely personalized aspect of home education can make the home school environment incredibly productive for these students. As one of Melissa’s teachers said, “Melissa’s mom is so organized and dedicated to her daughter’s learning, the one-on-one relationship, the tutoring, has been hugely beneficial” (MIVT). As well, the students seemed to prefer this one-on-one time with their parents, particularly when they were dealing with subject areas that were hard for them and, as a result, carried some level of stress. For instance, Trisha stated that, “ I prefer working at home, because I can have my mom beside me instead of having her going all over the place [like a teacher] helping a bunch of kids ... so that made math a lot easier” (TI). At the same time, it could also make the parent/teacher-child/student relationship quite intense, an emotional response that must be continually adjusted and managed. Ruth and Barbara discussed their organization of structure in their home school, relaying some of the tension that was present. “It changes regularly because I’ve tried the ‘list idea’ in the past and then I get negative reactions to that and the, you know, Ruth’s gone through phases where she’s

wanting me to write down everything” (RBI). The balance across productivity, pressure, and pleasure must always be handled carefully and is an inherent part of developing a healthy home school environment.

The parent-teachers in these home schooled households were highly educated with respect to their children’s needs, particularly when it involved the special needs of disabilities. All three mothers discussed their extensive use of research, training, and reading to help their children learn. As well, Ruth’s and Melissa’s parents acquired special therapeutic certification to meet the needs of their daughters in the home environment. Lydia, Trisha’s mother, frequently described academic literature that she had read with reference to home schooling and her children’s needs. The level of expertise found in these parents is consistent with home school research by Duffey (2002) when she described how parents of children with disabilities had read a wide variety of material after their children’s diagnoses, had attended teaching and parenting workshops and seminars, had done continuous research searches, and belonged to support groups and online communities that furthered education in the area of their child’s challenges. Duvall and his colleagues (1997, 2004) reinforced the idea that parents who home school children often become ‘experts’ in the area of their children’s disabilities, thus enabling them to be highly effective teachers for their children.

While the tutorial or one-on-one format of instruction was dominant in the home, these families did not just stay home to learn. They accessed tutors for specific subjects or skill areas, therapists and assessors (OT, speech therapy, physiotherapy, etc.), classes in specific realms of interest, and home school co-ops. Through these many resources, these girls were exposed to many other (than their home) tutorial environments and small

group formats, which, according to research, are hugely beneficial to their learning (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Vaughn et al., 2003; Wise et al., 2003).

As well, Melissa, Ruth, and Trisha had learned to negotiate the classroom environment and reap the benefits of learning that are best done in larger groups (Carrington, 1999; Hutchinson, 2002; Johnson, 1999; Martinez-Humphreys, 2006; Sapon-Shevin, 1996) through the extensive use of home school co-ops and interest-based classes. The home school co-op environment, in particular, made a valuable contribution to their educational journey. All three of these girls had participated in some form of home school co-op at some point in their academic lives. Both Trisha and Ruth had participated in the full range of home school co-op experiences, while Melissa had been involved in interest- or workshop-based co-ops. Either way, the students were able to work within a larger group of other home schoolers (usually multi-age) while at the same time getting instruction from another parent or teacher who had a particular skill or talent to offer. The girls represented in this thesis were able to get their focused, tutorial style instruction in the vital areas of their education while at the same time experiencing the academic value of a small group or classroom experience.

Academic Individualization: Characteristics of Instruction

Children who have learning disabilities require specific qualities of instruction to succeed academically. They do not necessarily ‘pick up’ information; they do not just ‘get it’ after reasonable exposure to a given set of skills. Their instruction must be explicit with increased repetition and instructional time, it must be intensive with opportunities for direct, systematic, and comprehensive exchanges, and, finally, it must be emotionally

and cognitively supportive (Duffey, 2002; Duvall et al., 1997, 2004; Gettinger & Seibert, 2002; Larkin & Ellis, 2004; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011).

The home school environments analyzed for this thesis certainly reflected previous research in this area. These home school environments provided a key intersection between quality instruction and individualized and/or small group format. In fact, a number of researchers have emphasized how low student-teacher ratios have encouraged high levels of academic engaged time (AET), a critical determiner of academic achievement in students with learning disabilities. Certain behaviours manifested higher levels of AET, such as increased opportunities to respond to instruction through writing, speaking, physical activity, reading aloud, and generally being involved or engaged in the academic material. The home school environment has been found to be highly favourable for all these components (Duvall, 2005; Duvall et al., 1997, 2004; Duffey, 2002; Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010; Medlin, 2000; Ray, 2000).

Intensive instruction. Ruth's mother (Barbara) talked of "doing what had to be done" to meet Ruth's schooling needs. Through this focused process, Ruth's mother had been able to provide a highly intensive form of education. The choice of curriculum and the method of delivery had encouraged increased opportunities for repetition, high expectations of focus, and high levels of academic engaged time. Barbara and Ruth sought material and pursued programs with the intent to focus, derive maximum benefit, and gain interest or useful knowledge that would allow Ruth to develop educationally.

Trisha's educational journey had been intensive through a different approach. Both Trisha and her mother described how she would follow certain paths of learning with significant intensity to understand something about which she was passionate. For

example, Trisha would often practice up to two hours a day on her violin, which had given her a high level of skill in this area.

Melissa's educational journey, particularly the early years, was frequently characterized as intensive by her mother. In the effort to successfully overcome her many challenges, Melissa had to focus on all areas of endeavour with such an approach. As Melissa's mother stated, "I believe with all my heart that it was this intense one-on-one time spent with Melissa day after day, year after year that has allowed her to progress to where she is today" (LI).

Explicit instruction. Along with the intensive pursuit of learning, students with learning disabilities need to receive instruction that is explicit in nature. These two components of instruction are often tightly linked. For example, as Ruth's family searched diligently for a way to teach Ruth how to read, they found a system that encouraged high levels of repetition, multiple modes of delivery, and multi-sensory approaches. The implementation of this curriculum required good resource material but it also required discipline and time, working extensively one-on-one, for Barbara to work through this system with Ruth. This effort was aided by the inherent opportunities that home schooling afforded their family.

Explicit instruction had also been a hallmark of Melissa's education. Melissa's mother, Lucie, described how almost every pursuit in Melissa's life must be prepared through explicit instruction. When Melissa wanted to teach Sunday school at her church, she had to be systematically and explicitly demonstrated all the steps that were required to go through that process: "We struggled for a few months because ... [I had to] show her how to do everything and then I came upon this idea of making a template for her

[which she follows]” (LI). Even to learn to communicate interpersonally, Melissa had required explicit instruction. Lucie had worked with her on a systematic approach to cognitive communication that explicitly laid out the process required to start, continue, and end conversations.

For Trisha, explicit instruction had been important but, unlike the other two girls, there was an inherent tension in her family between intensive learning revolving around the pursuit of interest and explicit instruction imposed by a need to cover certain essential skills. Lydia talked of the need to balance the pursuit of Trisha’s interests with the pursuit of skill-based learning in essential subjects such as math, reading, and spelling. To this end, she had spent considerable time with Trisha explicitly teaching her in topic areas that did not come easily to her. As Trisha explained, “well, for some subjects she helps us a lot, like math ... so that we don’t have to be distracted from other things and we can get more work done” (TI).

Cognitive and emotional support. For all three girls, cognitive and emotional support had been a critical component of their home school education. The inherent nature of home schooling allowed for the teaching parents to ‘coach’ their children, to encourage and to support them in their challenges, and to encourage them in their strengths. All the teaching parents of these girls discussed how they spent many hours sitting beside their children, giving them continuous feedback, trying to positively reinforce their efforts, and giving them encouragement to strive to higher levels.

Cognitive support often came in the form of ‘scaffolding’ where the parent instructed and encouraged a sequencing of skills so that the student was ‘scaffolded’ to reach for the next level. It is in this scenario that high levels of academic engaged time

(AET) become apparent as the scaffolding takes place through continuous dialogue, through an immediate cycle of feedback, and through the careful presentation and response to the working materials at hand. Perhaps the level of engagement seen in these girls and the level of support seen in the parents were strong because these parents knew their children extremely well, living and working with them extensively day after day.

For example, in Ruth's family, there were high standards of academic education. Both of their girls had learned an impressive array of subjects and read an extensive list of books. Ruth, despite her learning challenges, was not made an exception to this standard. Instead, she was helped, coached, and scaffolded through the process. Her mother spent considerable time reading to her and using specific curriculum and technology when appropriate. Barbara said that she spent much of their school time reading text to Ruth, reducing, adjusting, and modifying it so Ruth could read as much as possible, while at the same time enabling a high level of comprehension. Melissa's mother described a similar form of scaffolding that took place in their educational journey: "I am trying to push her a little bit so I will read to her because I know she won't get it if she just reads it" (LI). Sometimes this form of cognitive instruction can come from a non-parent teacher who has known the student over an extended time period. Trisha had worked with her violin teacher for many years. During a violin lesson, Trisha's teacher was able to encourage her gently but firmly towards her working goals, despite certain challenges. Trisha received a constant flow of positive criticism that, under different conditions, might have been overwhelming. However, there was a comfortable and encouraging flow of dialogue between student and teacher. Trisha's

teacher monitored and regulated each step before encouraging her to go on to the next step.

For all three girls, their educational journey had been complicated and, at times, very challenging. In some ways, emotional support became more critical than any other component as it took emotional strength to deal with the obstacles that must be overcome. Ruth and her mother often appeared emotional as they discussed their challenges. Lucie (Melissa's mother) described the exhausting and repetitive nature of the many therapies and programs that had been undertaken for Melissa to develop important skills. Despite these difficulties, there was always an underlying excitement about the educational journey that all three families had undertaken for their children. They relayed that excitement to their children, and they were encouraging and supportive, trying to lessen the children's frustrations as much as possible through scheduling, through interesting curriculum, and through palatable delivery of the instruction. All the families described how home schooling had allowed them to work with their children in an effective but healthy manner, appropriate for the level of learning while supporting them emotionally: "One of the benefits of being out of school is that she can move at her own pace, she is comfortable going back to a lower level" (TIM); "We encourage her to find her strengths and to capitalize on those strengths to learn new things" (LI); "You know, Ruth is just who she is and we love her just the way she is" (RBI).

Implications and Limitations

Implications for Home Schoolers

Children with learning disabilities often struggle to fit the system or the mold that is required of them in any regular school organization (Hutchinson et al., 2004; Pearl & Donahue, 2004; Vaughn et al., 2001; Zigmond & Baker, 1996). Parents who have children with learning disabilities often find themselves searching frantically for a suitable educational model to fit their children's needs. The search will often begin within the school system and, when the children's needs are still not being met, these parents will tend to search outside of the system, leading them to alternative models of education. As a result, these parents often turn to home schooling by default rather than by original intention. In part, this thesis was initiated because I frequently noticed families who were home schooling to meet the unique needs of their child's learning disabilities. The parents expressed the needs in terms of academics as well as the challenges of their children's social lives. As one author expressed, "for children who feel like 'square pegs', home schooling can be more than a good fit ... it can mean the difference between a miserable child and a happy one" (Rivero, 2008, p. 101).

Home schooling is a model that requires significant commitment from the family financially, emotionally, and academically. It is a huge lifestyle investment for the family yet, through this thesis, it is possible to see that home schooling can work well for the families who are willing to make the commitment. Students with learning disabilities do best in educational environments that provide the optimum conditions found at the intersection of specific and quality instruction (intensive, explicit, and supportive) within small group or tutorial modes of delivery (Elbaum et al., 2000; Foorman & Torgesen,

2001; Larkin & Ellis, 2004; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Vaughn et al., 2000). As seen within the case studies of this thesis, the home schooling environment is well suited to providing this type of educational experience.

The components that were demonstrated within these case studies that were particularly useful to the students with learning disabilities were exhibited in both academic and social realms. Demonstrated educational assets, such as higher levels of AET, small student-teacher ratios, and individualized and customized curriculum, were inherent in the home schooling environments examined. As well, intensive, explicit, and supportive modes of instructional delivery were described and observed. Socially, the children had access to appropriate friendships and peer-group association in a manner that was often palatable for children who typically struggled in the realm of socialization. The role of interest was highly exploited both socially and academically to meet the unique needs of these students. While home schooling certainly did not solve all their academic and social challenges, it did create an environment that was adaptive and supportive of their educational journeys. The home school environment can thus be a very useful and productive choice for students with learning disabilities, provided they are in families willing to make the commitment.

Implications for Non-Home Schoolers

Home schooling supports the research that calls for an increased need for an individualized and personalized education for children with learning disabilities, while at the same time maintaining the important values of inclusiveness for these children within the society that they exist (Elbaum et al., 2000; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; Graham & Bellert, 2004; Jones et al., 1997; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Scruggs et al., 2009; Torgesen et

al., 2001; Zigmond & Baker, 1996). Home schooling is able to walk that tenuous line between the need for individual attention while at the same time providing the benefits for students of being included in a healthy social milieu. While this social and academic environment looks different from the typical school classroom, this very difference may demonstrate some characteristics that could be useful within other educational environments.

For example, Littky and Allen (1999) described a learning environment that they had created at the experimental Met Schools on Rhode Island. At these six publicly funded schools, individualized learning was the driving force of the program. The Met schools received students from other schools where they were not succeeding academically. Individualized programs were set up for each student, often established around the primary interests of the student. Significant adults, such as teachers, mentors, and parents, often functioned more as coaches than teachers and frequently fulfilled the need for intensive, explicit, and supportive instruction. Internships were a key part of the instructional mandate. Students were matched with one or two coaches within their internships so that strong one-on-one learning relationships were developed over the course of various projects, fulfilling the need for small-group, tutorial modes of delivery.

Models of education such as home schooling and the Met Schools are institutions found within a very specific time and place and enabled by a specific set of people. They are models that are different from mainstream schools and, as such, have often been viewed with disrespect or even disdain by those who are more comfortable with the status quo of standard schooling. While these models do not meet all needs and are not available to all people, it is important to respect these models for what they have to offer.

It is also useful to discern which characteristics might be valuable to educators in other environments. Ultimately, it is important to value empirical evidence in our instructional decisions; we want all children to be included in their educational communities, but we also must strive to meet their unique needs for education. Home schooling should be respected in our communities for what it has to offer for those who are participants as well as for those who are observers and developers in the field of education.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This thesis points to home schooling as a positive educational model for children with learning disabilities, similar to previous research in the area. It would sometimes appear that home school environments are ‘all good’ for these children and that no negative consequences can occur through this educational choice. These studies, including this one, appear to be particularly optimistic, especially with respect to the academic achievement and socialization areas due, in part, to the limitations of this style of research. Since home school research, particularly studies that focus on students with learning disabilities, is in its infancy, the works tend to be exploratory in nature with a qualitative sense of discovery rather than intense and extensive examination. As home schooling research matures, a more balanced view may begin to surface and the research questions may begin to cut a little deeper.

Further limitations of home schooling research, some of which provide foundational information for all home school research, including this thesis, can be found in the larger scale quantitative home schooling studies as described in the literature review. In the large scale survey studies, all research is correlative in nature. Although this research could be called evidence-based, none of the research is truly experimental in

style. That is, it is highly unlikely that a group of students could be randomly assigned to a home schooling group and another group of students assigned to a conventional schooling group. It is conceivable that home-schooled students, with all their home advantages, might have done even better in a conventional school environment (Ray & Wartes, 1994).

Another limitation that may have created an unbalanced view in this research as well as research that precedes it is that much of the research is self-reporting in style. While this approach is of value to qualitative methods of inquiry, it can also promote an overly optimistic view of home schooling. Much research on methodologies has been done to show that self-reporting has some inherent disadvantages (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). As well, the subjects of this thesis were a tiny core of volunteers who might be considered the so-called cream of the crop – those who are particularly enthusiastic, confident, and successful. While their views on home schooling were legitimate and were only meant to be expressions of their particular voices and personal representations and, while their views cannot be inferred on any other group of people, it is still natural to take their picture of home schooling and see it as a representative picture of the model as a whole. Despite the understanding that outcomes and generalizations should not be inferred by the data, it is always difficult for human nature not to seek general understandings of phenomena when they are examined so explicitly.

Finally, my own personal bias is an important limitation to consider as this thesis is read. I have experience home schooling my children, including a child with learning disabilities. I have formed pre-conceived ideas and understandings of how home schooling worked for my child, and I also saw how it worked for other children in my

midst. At the time, I had no intention to do research on home schooling so these opinions were naturally formed as part of my association with this educational movement.

Subsequently, my children have attended other schools, and I have taught in a variety of other educational environments so my thought process should benefit from the variety of experiences to which I have been exposed. This association with home schooling prior to the research for this thesis has both its advantages as well as its disadvantages. On the one hand, I have to acknowledge the inherent bias that comes with association but, on the other hand, I had a wealth of knowledge and connection to the home school movement, which would not be possible without this association. I was able to start my research with a greater understanding of home schooling, both its advantages and disadvantages, giving me a higher springboard on which to poise my exploratory study.

The implications and need for home school research can best be described by one operative word: more. There needs to be more quantitative research as well as more qualitative style research. There needs to be more depth and breadth. Home school research is in its infancy and, as such, time should provide an increase in studies that will correct many of the deficiencies of this body of research, therefore providing a wider view of the home school community. Naturally, it is not enough to just create more studies for the sake of quantity only; quality must also prevail. As Medlin (2000) lamented, some of the current studies are plagued with issues of “inadequate experimental design, poorly defined research, untried and weak measures or data based on so few participants that results cannot be generalized” (p. 118).

In time, as home schooling ages and the research that follows matures along with it, there should be a healthy body of research that can be used by home schoolers, non-

home schoolers, and researchers alike. Donmeyer (1997) stated that, “different stories and their settings can characterize different life experiences which are worth examining” (p. 2). Holt (1981), a respected educator and one of the original advocates of home schooling, stated that “the home school movement is a laboratory for the intensive and long-range study of children’s learning and of ways in which friendly and concerned adults can help them learn” (p. 393). Ultimately, it is only through extensive research and the ensuing empirical evidence that the inherent advantages and disadvantages of home schooling children with learning disabilities will become known to educators and fully understood.

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APPENDIX A: LETTERS OF INFORMATION

Letter of Information (Teaching Parent)

Dear Parent/Guardian:

I am writing to request your participation and that of your child in research aimed at furthering the understanding of children with learning disabilities and their families, who home school. The ultimate goal of my research is to understand the value and meaning that children with learning disabilities and their families allocate to the activity of home schooling, particularly as it relates to issues of individualization of education and social inclusion. I am a student in the Faculty of Education, Queen's University, working on a thesis in order to complete the requirements for an M.Ed. This research has been cleared by the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board.

The methodology of the study will involve interviews of the teaching parent (you) and your child as well as another teaching adult that your child works with (someone you suggest) as he/she pursues an activity that is part of his/her educational life. The interview with your child will last approximately 30-45 minutes at a location you select. The interview will be conducted without you present. The interview with you would last approximately 60 minutes. The study will also involve two hour-long observations of you and your child as you pursue normal home schooling activities within the home and two hour-long observations of your child in an activity outside of the home (total observation time: 4 hours). Activities will be chosen with mutual agreement across all parties. I will audio-tape and take notes at the interviews and at the observation sessions. These notes will be written up and maintained as a computer file. The taped interview will be transcribed, and then the tape will be destroyed.

I do not foresee risks in your participation in this research. You and your child's participation are entirely voluntary. You and your child are not obliged to answer any questions that you find objectionable. You are free to withdraw from the study without reasons at any point, and you may request removal of all or part of your data.

This research may result in publications of various types, including journal articles, professional publications, newsletters and books. Your name will not be attached to any form of the data that you provide, neither will your name or the identity of your home be known to anyone tabulating or analyzing the data, nor will these appear in any publication created as a result of this research. A pseudonym will replace your name on all data that you provide to protect your identity. If the data are made available to other researchers for secondary analysis, your identity will never be disclosed.

If you have any questions about this project, please contact Sarah Loten at 613-264-0539, email: lotens@superaje.com, or her supervisor, John Freeman, 613-533-6000, ext. 77298, email: freemanj@queensu.ca. For questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, please contact the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca, or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Steve Leighton, (613) 533-6081, email: chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

Yours sincerely,
Sarah Loten

Letter of Information (Child)

I am writing this letter to ask you if you would be willing to participate in a research project that I am doing about children who are home schooled. I want to know what is important to you about home schooling, what you like and don't like, and what you think is valuable about home schooling. I am a student at Queen's University, and this research is part of a master's thesis that I will be completing.

I will be interviewing you and one of your parents and one of your teachers/coaches who teaches you. The interview with you will be about 30-45 minutes, and you can stop the interview anytime that you want to. I will interview you by yourself at a place your parent picks. The interview with your parent will be about 60 minutes, and the interview with your coach/teacher will be about 45 minutes. I will also observe you twice in your home as you work with your teaching parent (about 1 hour each time) and I will observe you at an outside activity two times for one hour each time. In all, I will observe you for four hours.

I will not observe or interview you about anything that you do not want to share with me. You can stop the observations or the interviews at any time if you are not comfortable. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time. I will audio-tape and take notes during the interviews and observation sessions. These notes will be written up and maintained as a computer file. The taped interviews will be transcribed (words you say copied onto the computer), and the tape will be destroyed.

The research from this project will be part of my thesis and may also be published in a newsletter, a journal, or in a book. Your name will not be attached to any of the information, and your family and home will not be identified. I will use pretend names instead of your name or your family's name.

If you have any questions, please contact me, Sarah Loten, at 613-264-0539 or email me at lotens@superaje.com or my supervisor, John Freeman, 613-533-6000, ext. 77298, email: freemanj@queensu.ca. For questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, please contact the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca, or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Steve Leighton, (613) 533-6081, email: chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Loten

Letter of Information (Non-Parent Teacher/Coach)

Title: Home Schooling Children with Learning Disabilities

I am writing to request your participation in research aimed at furthering the understanding of children with learning disabilities and their families, who home school. The ultimate goal of my research is to understand the value and meaning that children with learning disabilities and their families allocate to the activity of home schooling, particularly as it relates to issues of individualization of education and social inclusion. I am a student in the Faculty of Education, Queen's University, working on a thesis in order to complete the requirements for an M.Ed. This research has been cleared by the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board.

In this part of the research, I wish to document the views of a teacher or a coach about factors that influence academic individualization in the education of this child or the social inclusion of this child. The parent and child have suggested you as a person who would provide valuable information. I am planning to conduct an interview with you, for approximately 45 minutes, and to observe the child twice as he/she goes about normal activity within your care. Each observation will last approximately one hour (total observation time: 2 hours). I am inviting you to participate in this interview and observation period. We can decide a time and location that is mutually agreeable for both parties.

I will audio-tape the interview and take notes to make up a written record of your interview. I will take notes during the observations. The taped interview will be transcribed and maintained on a computer file and then the tape will be destroyed. None of the data will contain your name, or the identity of your place of work. The place of work will be identified using general terms only. Data will be secured in a locked office; your identity will be kept confidential.

I do not foresee risks in your participation in this research. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are not obliged to answer any questions you find objectionable, and you are assured that no information collected will be reported to anyone who is in authority over you. You are free to withdraw from the study without reasons at any point, and you may request removal of all or part of your data.

This research may result in publications of various types, including journal articles, professional publications, newsletters and books. Your name will not be attached to any form of the data that you provide, neither will your name or the identity of your place of work be known to anyone tabulating or analyzing the data, nor will these appear in any publication created as a result of this research. A pseudonym will replace your name on all data that you provide to protect your identity. If the data are made available to other researchers for secondary analysis, your identity will never be disclosed.

If you have any questions about this project, please contact Sarah Loten at 613-264-0539, email: lotens@superaje.com, or her supervisor, John Freeman, 613-533-6000, ext. 77298, email: freemanj@queensu.ca. For questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, I can contact the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca, or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Steve Leighton, (613) 533-6081, email: chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

Sincerely,

Sarah Loten

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORMS

Consent Form (Teaching Parent)

I have read and retained a copy of the letter of information concerning “Home Schooling Children with Learning Disabilities” and all questions have been sufficiently answered. I am aware of the purpose and procedures of this study, and I have been informed that the interviews will be recorded by audiotape. I am also aware that a third person I have identified will be interviewed. I understand that the interview with the child will last approximately 30-45 minutes, the parent interview will last approximately 60 minutes, and there will be four hour-long observations of the child (two hours with the parent and two in another setting).

I have been notified that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any point during the study and I may request the removal of all or part of our data without any consequences to ourselves. I have also been told the steps that will be taken to ensure confidentiality to the extent possible of all information.

I am aware that if I have any questions about this project, I can contact Sarah Loten at 613-264-0539, email: lotens@superaje.com, or her supervisor, John Freeman, 613-533-6000, ext. 77298, email: freemanj@queensu.ca. I am also aware that for questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, I can contact the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca, or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Steve Leighton, (613) 533-6081, email: chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THIS CONSENT FORM AND I AGREE TO ALLOW MY SON/DAUGHTER TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY. I ALSO AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY MYSELF.

Parent’s Name (please print): _____

Parent’s Signature _____

Date: _____

Please write your e-mail or postal address at the bottom of this sheet if you wish to receive a copy of the results of this study.

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Sarah Loten. Retain the second copy for your records.

Consent Form (Child)

I have read and kept a copy of the letter about this thesis which is about home schooling. All my questions have been answered. I know what is going to be happening in this study, and I have been told that the interviews will be tape-recorded. I also know that my parent and my teacher/coach will be interviewed about me. I understand that my interview will last about 30-45 minutes. I will also be observed for four hours, two hours at home and two hours somewhere else.

I know that participation is voluntary and that I may leave at any point during the study and I may ask that you not use what you have found out. I have also been told how you will keep my name and location as secret as you possibly can.

I understand that if I have any questions about this project, I can contact Sarah Loten at 613-264-0539, email: lotens@superaje.com, or her supervisor, John Freeman, 613-533-6000, ext. 77298, email: freemanj@queensu.ca. I also understand that for questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, I can contact the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca, or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Steve Leighton, (613) 533-6081, email: chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THIS CONSENT FORM AND I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Student's Name (please print): _____

Student's Signature _____

Date: _____

Please write your e-mail or postal address at the bottom of this sheet if you wish to receive a copy of the results of this study.

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Sarah Loten. Retain the second copy for yourself.

Consent Form (Non-Parent Teacher/Coach)

I have read and retained a copy of the letter of information concerning “Home Schooling Children with Learning Disabilities,” and all questions have been sufficiently answered. I am aware of the purpose and procedures of this study, and I have been informed that the interview will be recorded by audiotape. I understand that the interview with me will be approximately 30-45 minutes. As well, I understand that subsequent observation(s) may take place of my teaching/coaching of the student being studied.

I have been notified that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any point during the study and I may request the removal of all or part of my data without any consequences to myself. I have also been told the steps that will be taken to ensure confidentiality to the extent possible of all information.

I am aware that if I have any questions about this project, I can contact Sarah Loten at 613-264-0539, email: lotens@superaje.com, or her supervisor, John Freeman, 613-533-6000, ext. 77298, email: freemanj@queensu.ca. I am also aware that for questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, I can contact the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca, or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Steve Leighton, (613) 533-6081, email: chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THIS CONSENT FORM AND I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

Teacher’s/Coach’s Name (please print): _____

Teacher’s/Coach’s Signature _____

Date: _____

Please write your e-mail or postal address at the bottom of this sheet if you wish to receive a copy of the results of this study.

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Sarah Loten. Retain the second copy for your records.

APPENDIX C: QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS

Questions for Teaching Parent

1. What is the main reason that you chose to home school your child?
2. What do you like about home schooling? What do you dislike about home schooling?
3. In a week of home schooling, what do you like to get done?
4. Describe a day in the life of...
5. What sorts of activities do you typically do at home? What sorts of activities do you do outside of the home?
6. What learning disabilities has your child been diagnosed with?
7. How much did the learning disabilities influence your decision to home school?
8. How do you think that home schooling helps your child with LD? How do you think that home schooling hinders your child with LD?
9. What tools do you use to help your child learn? Curriculum? Resources? Tutors?
10. Describe a moment when your child is struggling with an activity. How do you help your child to overcome the difficulty? What works best for the two of you?
11. Do you think that home schooling provides a better environment than school or worse? What do you see as the advantages/disadvantages to the home school environment, academically?
12. Do you feel that socially, home schooling works well for your child? Has it worked better or worse in the past? What sorts of things does she like to engage in?
13. What works best for your child, socially? What sort of things or social situations does she enjoy most?
14. What is your child's social network like? Close friends? Acquaintances? People of all ages or mostly kids her own age? Is she comfortable talking to people of all ages or just certain ages?
15. Do you think that home schooling provides a better environment than school or worse? What do you see as the advantages/disadvantages, socially, to the home school environment?

Questions for the Child

1. What do you like the most about home schooling? What do you like the least?
2. What classes/activities do you do outside of home? What are your favourite activities that you do outside your house? Your least favourite?
3. What sorts of activities do you do at home? What are your favourite activities that you do at home? Your least favourite?
4. How does your mom/dad teach you at home? Describe a day of home schooling.
5. If you find something particularly hard, how does your mom/dad help you when you get stuck?
6. What are your hardest subjects? What are your easiest subjects?
7. Do you have other teachers, other than your parents?
8. What would you like to be when you grow up?
9. Do you think that home schooling has helped you to learn the things you need to know so that you can be ...
10. Who are your favourite friends? Where do you see them most often? What do you do together when you get together?
11. In the activities that you do outside of home, who is in the group? People of all ages or people mostly your own age?
12. Do you like spending time with just friends your age or do you like to spend time with people of all ages?
13. If you got to plan a great day, what would you plan for yourself? Tell me about it.
14. Describe a really good day that you had this past year.

Questions for Non-Parent Teacher/Coach

1. How are you involved with this child? How often do you see this child and in what context?
2. How does this child handle the activity? Is she successful or have fun with it or is it difficult for her?
3. How much confidence does this child have when participating in the activity?
4. How does this child interact with other children/people in the group? How does she fit in? Does she have any good friends or are they more casual friendships?
5. How do you see her relationship with you? Is it comfortable, relaxed, etc.?
6. Do you find it easy or hard to work with this child? Why?
7. How do you tend to work on things with her, if a concept is difficult for her?
8. If something was a struggle in the past, how did you work through it? Describe the situation.
9. Ask questions related to the observation period.

APPENDIX D: EXPLANATION OF CODES USED

Chapter 4: Melissa

MH	Home observation of Melissa
MI	Interview with Melissa
LI	Interview with Lucie (Melissa's mother)
MO	Observation of Melissa doing her independence training at a grocery store, in a shopping mall, and in discussion with a friend at a café
MDC	Melissa's dance class observation and interview with her dance teacher
MIVT	Interview with Melissa's independence teacher/worker whom she also considers one of her closest friends

Chapter 5: Trisha

TH	Home observation of Trisha
TI	Interview with Trisha
TIM	Interview with Trisha's mother (Lydia)
TB	Observation of Trisha at a home schoolers' basketball game and social time
TV	Observation of Trisha's violin lesson
TIV	Interview with Trisha's violin teacher

Chapter 6: Ruth

RH	Home observation of Ruth
RBI	A combined interview with Ruth and Barbara (Ruth's mother). Ruth did not want to be interviewed alone so they took turns answering questions and discussing points. The interview was longer than the individual interviews.
RC	Observation of Reba in three home school co-op classes
RO	Observation of Reba in recreational games at the home school co-op
RIT	Interview with Ruth's home school co-op teacher