

**THE VOICES OF YOUNG ADULTS WITH LEARNING
DISABILITIES: THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF ELEMENTARY AND
SECONDARY SCHOOLING**

by

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Abstract

The classroom is a space in which students can participate in both academic and social experiences. Perceptions of school held by students with learning disabilities (LD) may be different than those held by their peers. Researchers suggest that students with LD may experience a sense of being different and isolated from their peers because of their learning differences (Alexander-Passe, 2008; Lackaye & Margalit, 2006). Defining LD is a complex and contested process. However, the lack of a universal definition can contribute to misconceptions about LD. Moreover, this lack of a universal definition makes it challenging for teachers, both new and experienced, to fully understand how to work with students who have LD.

Students who have been identified as having a learning disability are sometimes removed from their regular classroom for designated periods of time every day and are placed in a special education setting such as a resource room where they receive explicit instruction to help develop their reading and decoding abilities (Nugent, 2008). Thus, this location difference adds to the differences in educational experiences students with LD can encounter.

This qualitative research describes the perceptions of three young adults (aged 18–21) with learning disabilities (YALD) about their educational experiences in elementary and secondary school. Data were collected through two face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis of the data was conducted.

The findings are reported both individually to allow unique stories to emerge and collectively to highlight similar themes discussed by all three participants. Furthermore, the analysis identified academic, social, and interconnection of academic and social

experiences from the participants' discussions. The participants did not think that they were disabled in learning; rather they understood it as they simply learned differently than their non-LD peers. The lack of understanding about LD from teachers and peers, especially in elementary school, was a predominant theme that emerged. The participants suggested that teachers should get to know the individual rather than identifying characteristics of exceptionalities in order to help teachers better understand and work with students with LD.

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Many people have told me that, because I have a learning disability, I would not be successful in post-secondary and that I could not go onto graduate school. So when I first started the graduate program, I wanted to prove to myself that I could complete a Master's degree. But going through this journey, I realized that the comments made by those people pushed me further and contributed to my aspiration to show the strength and determination that individuals with learning disabilities do have in being successful. Students with learning disabilities do not have a limitation to their abilities and they can reach for the stars like everyone else.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The classroom is a space in which students can participate in both academic and social experiences. But perceptions of school held by students with learning disabilities (LD) may be different than those held by their peers. Researchers suggest that they may experience a sense of being different and isolated from their peers because of their learning differences (Alexander-Passe, 2008; Lackaye & Margalit, 2006). Furthermore, Riddick (1996) described students with LD as often “disappointed, frustrated, ashamed, fed up, sad, depressed, angry and embarrassed by their difficulties” (p. 129), which may influence their educational experiences and how they participate in the classroom. Zambo (2004) argued that, “children with [LD] are vulnerable to becoming academically, socially, and emotionally detached from education” (p. 80). The question that I want to answer is: What are the perceptions held by young adults with learning disabilities (YALD) about their educational experiences?

Purpose

This research reports the perceptions of three young adults (aged 18–21) with learning disabilities (YALD) about their educational experiences. They were asked to describe their experiences when they were students in elementary and secondary school. Burden and Burdett (2007) recognized that a lack of research has been carried out from the perspective of young adults with LD. Reporting the school experiences of individuals with LD should provide an enriched understanding of the academic and social successes

and challenges of these individuals. Through their experiences, I want to highlight the social awareness and pedagogical improvements needed, such as teaching strategies, and increased awareness of LD, within schools for students with LD.

Accordingly, the overarching purpose of this research is to broaden teachers' understanding about the academic and social experiences that YALD have had throughout their schooling. Meeting this purpose will be facilitated by the following three research questions:

- (1) What academic and social experiences do YALD report having throughout their elementary and secondary schooling?
- (2) What experiences were positive and which were negative and why?
- (3) What recommendations do YALD have for teachers to do or change in their classrooms to better accommodate students with LD?

This research will build upon previous studies examining reflections from adults with LD that have been carried out within various countries, such as the United States (Burden, 2008), Holland (Singer, 2005), and Sweden (Ingesson, 2007); this study will add the perspective of some young adults with LD in Ontario, Canada.

The lack of a universal definition of LD may contribute to misconceptions about LD. Defining LD is a complex and contested process; no other issue within the field of special education has created more confusion than determining a definition of LD (Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2007; Kirby & Williams, 1991). The lack of a universal definition makes it challenging for teachers, both new and experienced, to fully

understand this concept. Furthermore, teachers often do not know how to accommodate these students within the classroom (Ingesson, 2007).

For the purposes of this research, I defined the term *learning disabilities* according to the definitions used by The Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) and the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO) as “a variety of disorders that affect the acquisition, retention, understanding, organization or use of verbal and/or non-verbal information” (LDAO, 2011b). Learning disabilities are the highest incidence exceptionality and constitute a general category composed of more heterogeneous disabilities within specific academic subjects (Fletcher et al., 2007; Torgesen, 2004). This definition implies not only that LD may affect many aspects of students’ learning but also that students who are identified as having a learning disability struggle with their learning in the classroom. The severity of LD varies among individuals influencing their acquisition and use of important skills including: oral language (listening, speaking, and understanding), written language (spelling and written expression), reading (decoding and comprehension), and mathematics (computation and problem solving) (LDAO, 2011b; OME, 2006).

Furthermore, specific learning disabilities (SLD) is a phrase used within the special education field to denote that several kinds of LD exist; this term highlights the complexities of using a single term to define LD. SLD include conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia (OME, 2006). SLD do not include children who have learning

problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor impairments; physical handicap; mental retardation; primary emotional disturbance; or cultural differences (OME, 2006). Use of the term SLD acknowledges that LD can be manifested in various ways that create academic and social challenges for students in school; hence, it is important to distinguish these challenges from other factors that influence learning.

Students who have been identified as having learning disabilities are sometimes physically removed from their regular classroom context for designated periods of time and may be taught in a special education context, such as a resource room, where they receive explicit instruction to help develop their reading and decoding abilities (Baumeister, Storch, & Geffken, 2008; Nugent, 2008). This may contribute to the way(s) students with LD experience school because leaving the classroom can focus the attention of the rest of the class to create stigmas of “students with LD as being different” (Baumeister et al., 2008, p. 13). Accordingly, I contend that students with LD may have different perceptions of school, both academically and socially, than their non-learning disabled peers. The terms *regular* and *mainstream* classroom are used interchangeably within the literature. For the purposes of this research, I used the term *regular* to refer to the students’ classroom where they participate with their peers in learning curriculum.

Rationale

Having a SLD myself, I have experienced not only a lack of understanding by my teachers about how to accommodate exceptionalities but also academic and social exclusion within schools. Being victimized by many of my teachers, mostly in secondary

school, who may not have understood this exceptionality, often made me feel like it was my fault for having this difficulty. I felt they were telling me I was not trying hard enough and that I was being lazy in class. Throughout my educational career in both elementary and secondary school, I had to leave my regular classroom for extended periods of time during the day, going to a resource room in order to receive instruction. Having to leave my regular classroom meant that I was centered out in front of my peers and experienced the development of awkward social relationships with my peers. Being away from my regular classroom, I also experienced academic situations that differed from my peers. I had more direct and one-on-one instruction to accommodate my SLD, different from what occurred within my regular classroom. I believe that unpacking school experiences through the perceptions of YALD may provide a richer understanding of their unique academic and social experiences in elementary and secondary school. This research may enable a deeper understanding of LD and of individual experiences, which may contribute to improved teaching practices and increased social awareness within classrooms and schools.

Much of the learning disability research has focused on the experiences of students with LD within their current regular classroom context (Firth, Greaves, & Frydenberg, 2010; O'Rourke & Houghton, 2006; Polychroni, Koukoura, & Anagnostou, 2006; Richardson, 1996). Little research has addressed the perceptions of school experiences of individuals with LD who have recently left or finished school. Some research has focused on perceptions of adults long after they have completed school. To

develop a better understanding by practitioners of what LD are and of their academic and social effects on students, I believe that it is important to look at the issue from the perspective of those affected by it. This research should help to provide a more holistic understanding of what they experienced through their entire school career, rather than focusing on one classroom, as much of the literature does.

Students with LD have reported that they feel a great sense of intimidation within their regular classroom context (O'Rourke & Houghton, 2006). They said that being surrounded by peers who did not have an identified learning disability caused much stress for them, which can be a foundation of negative social experiences within the regular classroom (Ingesson, 2007). Furthermore, students with LD often require much more time and effort to complete an academic task than their non-LD classmates and do not receive as high a mark, all of which contribute to lower self-confidence in achieving the same academic success as their non-LD peers (Denhart, 2008; Klassen & Lynch, 2007). For students with LD, these negative experiences often result in a dislike of school and attempts at hiding their difficulties from their peers in order to improve their academic and social experiences within their regular classroom (Firth et al., 2010; Nugent, 2008; O'Rourke & Houghton, 2006; Polychroni et al., 2006; Richardson, 1996).

Significance

While a number of studies has taken these issues into consideration when studying the experiences of students with LD in one of their current regular classrooms, “a void exists in the literature concerning the emotional experiences related to living with

a diagnosed [learning disability] over the course of life” (McNulty, 2003, p. 363). Thus, it becomes imperative that researchers investigate the perceptions of school experiences through the voices of YALD who have finished their elementary and secondary career. Furthermore, Wadlington, Elliot, and Kirylo (2008) stated that “teachers are often not well informed with respect to the possible multiple manifestations of [learning disabilities] within a classroom setting” (p. 271). Therefore, an unpacking of the perceptions of school experiences by YALD may provide an enriched understanding for teachers about the academic and social barriers that these individuals encountered when they were in school. Thus, teachers may be more able to accommodate their students with LD by facilitating a more appropriate learning environment.

Overview of Thesis

This research captured the experiences of three YALD—Zack, Laura, and Shane. The following is an outline of the structure of this thesis. The literature review for this study is provided in Chapter 2 and addresses the importance of gaining the perspectives from YALD about their experiences of elementary and secondary school. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology used to conduct this research including participant selection, interview site, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 provides a thick description of the participants and their individual stories. Chapter 5 reports the cross-case analysis of the participants in order to answer the research questions. Finally, Chapter 6 is the discussion of the findings through the connection to the literature reviewed and the research questions asked.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Society has constructed the values and abilities of individuals with learning disabilities (LD) largely without consulting with individuals with LD (Denhart, 2008; Dudley-Marling, 2004). This literature review addresses the importance of understanding the social and academic perceptions of elementary and secondary school held by young adults with learning disabilities (YALD) to help enrich the understanding of LD and of the challenges students with LD face every day in school. To begin, the literature review reveals a lack of knowledge held by many teachers and parents about LD and the barriers which their students and children encounter daily. This literature review underscores the importance of better understanding LD. Reporting the perceptions of LD from the perspectives of teachers and parents is important because, if their students do not have the support they need either at school or in the home, educational experiences may become more challenging for them (Burden, 2008; Lackey & Margalit, 2006). Next, articles and studies about the social acceptance of LD within society and schools are reviewed to illustrate how acceptance by others can shape the ways in which YALD have experienced their education. Subsequently, the review focuses on psychosocial barriers associated with LD that are reported within the literature.

Next, this literature review reports on specialized classrooms and schools. Studies have reported experiences of LD in school through the voices of the students within their current classrooms. As well, studies have reported the perceptions of adults with LD

reflecting on their school years. From these experiences, this literature review unpacks the coping strategies used by individuals with LD to heighten awareness of how students with LD make accommodations in order to manage within their classrooms, a pattern that may influence their educational experiences.

In all, this review of the literature enables the recognition of the importance of understanding the YALD perceptions of their academic and social experiences within the classroom to provide an enriched understanding of LD that goes beyond a psychological assessment.

Lack of Understanding by Teachers and Parents

Lack of understanding and knowledge of teachers and parents is a critical aspect within LD literature and may shape the educational perceptions of YALD. Making teachers aware of what it is like for students with LD within the classroom is a significant component that is frequently raised within LD research. Students must be able to develop a confident connection with the classroom by having their difficulties understood and accommodated. Through their lack of knowledge about LD, teachers may create misconceptions and act upon them; for example, they may belittle their students by telling them they are only being “lazy” (Denhart, 2008, p. 485), causing the students to feel that they, rather than their learning disability, are the problem (Macdonald, 2009; Silverman, 2007). Furthermore, without an understanding of LD, some teachers may consider accommodations for students within the classroom as an “unfair advantage” (Denhart, 2008, p. 485) and a way for students with LD to get out of doing work.

However, if teachers understood LD, they would know that students with LD have to work even harder than their non-learning disabled peers to achieve an average or just below average academic standing (Denhart, 2008; Klassen & Lynch, 2007).

Macdonald's (2009) study, based on a questionnaire and interview of 77 dyslexic individuals (aged 18–45+), examined dyslexia through the social model of disability. This approach argued that reactions to LD are not based on biological impairment, but are institutionalized through social perceptions of LD (Macdonald, 2009). In other words, it is through society that negative stereotypes of LD are developed, creating educational barriers for students with a learning disability (Nind, Flewitt, & Payler, 2010). Examining LD through the interpretations of those with LD is “fundamental to the construction of the social model of disability” (Macdonald, 2009, p. 350), and can help to diminish future educational barriers for students with LD. An example of the importance of listening to the first hand experiences of YALD is offered by a participant with dyslexia within Macdonald's study, who described what her own experience was in one of her classrooms. She stated,

My experience definitely was . . . terrible in terms of everyone always speaking down to you slightly, saying well done in a slow voice, and . . . not really taking you very seriously . . . [T]hose people didn't see beyond the dyslexia at all . . . [The teacher and I] would never talk about things [such as dyslexic coping strategies] . . . it was always just about spelling and writing. (Macdonald, 2009, p. 355)

Through this brief description, it can be understood how classroom experiences influence the lives of students with LD because of the lack of understanding often shown by teachers.

Lack of understanding and knowledge about LD is a predominant theme within the literature (Burden, 2008; McNulty, 2003; Singer, 2005; Terras, Thompson, & Minnis, 2009). McNulty's (2003) interview-based study suggested that

Education for parents and professionals about the concept of a learning disability and the resulting learning differences would seemingly reduce misunderstandings that feel negative or traumatic through creating a more sensitive, supportive, and pluralistic culture of learning at home, on the playground, and in the classroom.

(p. 377)

Therefore, the lack of understanding by teachers and parents about LD can have an effect on students' academic and social experiences, which in turn, can influence their perceptions of their educational career.

Teachers' Understanding of LD

Teachers are an important part of the classroom; they help to set the environment and provide a support system for students. Wadlington and Wadlington (2005) conducted a survey of 250 faculty members and students in the college of education in a southern regional university in the United States. The purpose of the study was to report how educators felt about providing effective instruction for students with LD. The results showed that large numbers of educators, including mainstream elementary and secondary

teachers, special educators, school counselors, administrators, and university faculty, had misconceptions about dyslexia and other LD. Learning disabilities are very complex and not having a comprehensive understanding of them can result in difficulties in the classroom for the teacher and especially for the students with LD. Having misconceptions about LD can influence the pedagogical practices that teachers use to interact with students with LD (Silverman, 2007; Wadlington & Wadlington, 2005). It is important for teachers to have an empathetic level of understanding of the experiences of students with LD within the classroom, as a beginning approach to changing the classroom into a more positive experience for students with LD.

Wadlington, Elliot, and Kirylo (2008) conducted a dyslexia simulation to study the perceptions of 345 teacher candidates, students who were training to become certified teachers, about dyslexia and their understanding of what their students experience. Wadlington et al. had their educator participants take part in the dyslexia simulation based on the program *Put Yourself in the Shoes of a Dyslexic*, developed by Martha Reener of the North California Branch of the International Dyslexia Association in 1989. The simulation was designed to provide a hands-on experience that allows participants to “experience the frustration, exasperation, and learning difficulties” (Wadlington et al., 2008, p. 266) that students with dyslexia experience in reading and writing for decoding, comprehension, writing and visual-motor difficulties, fine-motor problems, and visual perception and processing. The findings of Wadlington et al.’s study suggested that the simulation allowed the teacher candidates to gain an understanding of the “frustrations

and anger that these students go through even when they are trying hard” (p. 268), something that the teacher candidates were unaware of before the simulation. Having experienced teachers participate within the simulation would have provided a further dimension to the study to highlight the importance of understanding LD that might have influenced their practice to help enhance educational experiences for students with LD.

Teachers often have a minimal understanding of why their students with LD experience difficulty with reading and writing tasks (Moats, 2009). Through a lack of knowledge about LD, teachers can have misconceptions, which can make students with LD feel self-conscious about their place within the classroom (Singer, 2008). To address this issue, I believe that research must look at this issue from the perspective of teacher candidates during their education within faculties of education. Gwernan-Jones and Burden (2010) did address this issue through their study.

Gwernan-Jones and Burden’s (2010) questionnaire-based research addressed teacher candidates’ knowledge of dyslexia and their attitudes towards the construct. The questionnaire was given to 500 students attending Primary and Secondary Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in South-West England at the end of their first term in an Education faculty (in December) and again in July after their teaching placement was completed. Through statistical analysis, the results yielded that the teacher candidates had a positive attitude about including students with different learning difficulties within their classroom. However, it was interesting to note that, even though they had a positive attitude about the students with LD, the findings were similar to those in the Wadlington

et al. (2008) study in that the educators did not feel confident about how to provide support for students with LD in the classroom. Such identification of teachers' lack of confidence in their ability to support students with LD in their classrooms is a common theme within the LD literature (e.g., Hornstra, Denessen, Bakker, van den Bergh, & Voeten, 2010; Paterson, 2007).

Further in-depth instruction is needed to provide teachers with effective interventions and strategies for helping students with LD succeed in the classroom (Gwernan-Jones & Burden, 2010). This notion of more in-depth instruction was a common response from teachers, new and experienced, found in the literature because much emphasis is placed on the fact more detailed instruction is needed in teacher education classes about LD and about working with these students (e.g., Moats, 2009; Richardson, 1996). Gwernan-Jones and Burden (2010) concluded their study by stating that, often, once newly trained teachers enter the profession in a school that has a more negative attitude towards the inclusion of students with LD within the classroom, their motivation to help and accept these students may decrease.

Teachers' acceptance of LD. The attitudes and perceptions of teachers about LD can contribute to the type of experiences students with LD have within their classrooms. Teacher expectations for students with LD can affect "how teachers interact with their students" (Hornstra et al., 2010, p. 516) and this can influence the students' academic achievement within that classroom. Furthermore, the lack of knowledge and understanding of LD can influence the type of experiences that students with LD can

have in the classroom. Through actions like low teacher expectations for students with LD, this may lower confidence levels in their academic ability (Klassen & Lynch, 2007). This can happen within the classroom especially if a teacher does not believe in LD and thinks that it is an excuse for laziness (Barga, 1996; Denhart, 2008; Klassen & Lynch, 2007; McNulty, 2003).

Effective teaching requires knowing about each student's individual academic situation to modify instruction for inclusive learning for all (Klassen & Lynch, 2007; Paterson, 2007); however, teachers' perceptions of LD can influence their approach to inclusion and overall acceptance of students with LD within that classroom. Hornstra et al. (2010) reported the attitudes of 30 teachers—teaching Grade 2 through Grade 6 with an average of 14 years of experience—towards dyslexia. As well, they reported the effect of teacher expectations and academic achievement of these students compared to non-dyslexic students within 16 schools in the south and middle of the Netherlands. The purpose was to report if having a learning disability label influenced teacher perceptions for that student; this was accomplished through administering implicit and explicit instruments. The implicit instrument was an evaluative computer-priming task that used dyslexia as a priming word. This word was then followed by target words and the teachers had to choose if the target word was positive or negative towards dyslexia. This instrument assisted with the measurement of teachers' attitudes towards dyslexia. Additionally, the use of a questionnaire as an explicit instrument was also administered to

help understand if the label of learning disability on a student influenced teachers' perception of academic ability (Hornstra et al., 2010).

Hornstra et al.'s (2010) findings from using multiple regression analysis yielded that a learning disability label did not appear to influence teachers' attitudes and expectations towards these students in this study. However, these results are in contrast to more qualitative narratives about the perceptions of students and adults with LD about their classroom experiences with a range of teachers (e.g., Barga, 1996; Denhart, 2008; Kassen & Lynch, 2007; Macdonald, 2009; McNulty, 2003). These studies reported that often the label of a student having a learning disability evoked a negative image by some teachers that can contribute to lower academic expectations for the students (Barga, 1996; Denhart, 2008; Kassen & Lynch, 2007; Macdonald, 2009; McNulty, 2003). In Hornstra et al.'s study, the teachers were self-reporting through a questionnaire. It is possible that the teachers may have not wanted to portray themselves as having negative feelings and perceptions about LD and thus may have given socially desirable responses. Teachers' perceptions and beliefs may influence how they accept and accommodate students with LD within their classroom. These perceptions from teachers may leave students with LD who do not have the support they need in the classroom, to rely on the support from their parents to help them get through their academic barriers within the classroom.

Parental Understanding of LD

The importance of understanding and supporting students with LD goes beyond the classroom and into the home. Much of the literature emphasized the significance of students with LD having the support and understanding of their parents to help with academic and social challenges presented by their LD (Alexander-Passe, 2006; Burden, 2008; Burden & Burdett, 2007; Singer, 2005; Singer, 2008; Terras et al., 2009; Zambo, 2004). Parents need to understand what that learning disability means and what accommodations are needed for their child within the classroom to help their child have better educational experiences both academically and socially.

Often parents have little or no knowledge about LD before their child becomes identified. There is a lack of literature reporting LD from the perspective of the parent. The parental perspective is important to consider when looking at the educational experiences of YALD because teachers and parents can be most influential in shaping experiences for children (Pentyliuk, 2002; Singer, 2005). Parents, in particular, are one of the most important sources of support for children with LD (Singer, 2005) because most parents can help restore assurance and self-esteem when their child has negative experiences at school. Therefore, parents, in addition to teachers, must have a strong knowledge of LD.

Parental involvement in their child's assessment for a learning disability can be helpful for both the child and teacher, because it may result in parents providing specific details about their child's background to help with a more accurate and complete

diagnosis of the child (Pentyliuk, 2002). As well, the involvement and support of the parent may help with the transition of becoming identified with a learning disability and getting classroom accommodations put in place, which could lead to improved achievement in school for the child. Pentyliuk's (2002) interview study reported the perceptions of parents about their involvement within their children's assessment for a learning disability. The purpose of that study was to report the lived experiences of the selected parents who were involved within their child's assessment. However, this study cannot be applied to all parents of children with LD, because some parents remain disconnected from their children's academic lives (Singer, 2005).

Through a two-interview process, the Supervisor of Special Needs for a small school board in Northern Alberta selected parents of six students with LD who met the criteria for the research and were able to express their experiences of having a child with a learning disability (Pentyliuk, 2002). Pentyliuk, however, did not identify the criteria used for parent selection in his study. Through standard theme analysis of both interviews, findings reported that three out of six parents had no previous experience with assessment did not have an understanding of LD and did not know what to do to prepare their child for the assessment (Pentyliuk, 2002). The parents were reported being "bombarded with information" (p. 22) from the assessment, which left them in a state of confusion as to what exactly a learning disability was and what was happening with their child. Not being able to fully understand what the assessment was telling them about their child created stress for the parents and the child; they did not know what their child's

learning disability was and what accommodations were needed to be put in place to help their child within the classroom. Furthermore, the parents reported that they felt alone because “none of the school personnel had the time or the resources to meet all of their children’s needs” (p. 24). The parents wanted to find more information about LD so that they could understand their children’s struggles and help them to adjust within the classroom.

Parents can serve as an important “benefactor” (Barga, 1996, p. 417) for their child’s learning disability. Barga defined a benefactor as a person who provides emotional support and understanding, is a sounding board for personal problems, helps with the completion of homework, and most importantly, acts as an advocate on behalf of the individual. Parents are often placed within this role for their children; however, this can become even more essential as a role for children with LD, especially after assessment and in the process of understanding the diagnosis of the learning disability for determining appropriate accommodations for the child. It is important for the child to have the support of his or her parent(s) because much of the literature’s student participants reported that having parental support meant that they did not have to face the difficulties of having a learning disability on their own, which may influence their personal acceptance of having a learning disability (Burden, 2008; Gans, Kenny, & Ghany, 2003; Ingesson, 2007; McNulty, 2003; Singer, 2005; Singer, 2008; Terras et al., 2009).

Student Acceptance of Their LD

It is also important that students know about their LD so that they can understand and accept what they need from others to help themselves and to become self-advocates. Wanting to capture common aspects of life stories for people with dyslexia, McNulty's (2003) narrative research reported the stories of having dyslexia as a child after interviewing 12 adults aged 25–45 with dyslexia. Following the cross-case analysis of all the interviews, the results reported that how these participants understood and accepted their LD depended on the quality of explanation they received after their diagnosis. Having an explanation of the student's LD was a critical step for them because it allowed for the internalizing of what they had been going through within the classroom and helped them to utilize their strengths to advocate for their needs (Ingesson, 2007; Terras et al., 2009).

This process of understanding LD is related to Higgins, Raskind, Goldberg, and Herman's (2002) five stages to acceptance of a learning disability. Higgins et al.'s article was developed from data gathered in a 20-year longitudinal study of 41 students with LD to understand life experiences of students with LD and focused on the changes in past and present attitudes, emotions, conceptions, and meanings related to LD from the students' perspective using questionnaires and interviews. Details about how many interviews were carried out with each participant were not provided; the only information provided was that the interviews were intensive and were from four to six hours in length over the 20-year period. This lack of description of methodology makes it difficult to

fully understand the process used in this research study. However, to be included within the study, the participants had to attend The Frostig Center for a least a year. The Frostig Center is a non-profit organization that works with students with LD. Its three objectives are (a) conducting research on the cause/effect of LD; (b) providing parent, tutor, educator training, and consultation in how to work with children with LD; and (c) offering direct instructional services to children with LD (Frostig Center, 2011). Through a longitudinal design and thematic analysis of the interview transcriptions from the participants, Higgins et al. were able to provide a model of acceptance for students with LD.

Higgins et al.'s (2002) model of acceptance identified five generalized stages from participants' responses to interviews over the duration of the study for accepting their LD. The stages identified were: (a) a period of awareness of their differences; (b) the labeling event; (c) a period of understanding the limiting nature of this learning disability and of negotiation with service providers for assistance; which eventually leads to (d) compartmentalization of the LD; and (e) a transformation of negative attitudes towards their learning disability into the appreciation of the positive influence it has had on their lives and character. Working through these stages, students were said to deal with their emotions of being identified as having a learning disability and to develop a sense of self-acceptance. Higgins et al. did not investigate the speed or the occurrence of the stages; as well, they did not make any claims about participants' passage through

these stages. Furthermore, the identification of whether students with LD go through all five stages was not reported within Higgins et al.'s study.

Reporting the perceptions and experiences of adults with LD is important because it allows for reflection about their education and what they experienced in and out of the classroom and their acceptance of their LD. However, there is a wide age range within the literature on adults with LD as participants (e.g., Barga, 1996; Riddick, Sterling, Farmer, & Morgan, 1999; Shessel & Reiff, 1999), which can influence the data. The identification and recognition of LD within schools are different for adults who are 20 or 30 years apart in age, because researchers' and society's understanding of LD have changed over time. The literature reporting the experiences of adults with LD with wider age ranges does provide an excellent foundation of understanding the significance of getting the perspective of those with LD. However, in reporting the educational experiences from the perceptions of YALD, a smaller age range and more similar education systems amongst the participants will allow for a more holistic understanding of recent LD educational and social experiences in school.

Social Acceptance

It can be thought that having a learning disability is merely an academic challenge; but for many individuals, having a learning disability extends beyond the classroom and into the social world. Moreover, having a learning disability does not go away once school is completed; it persists throughout life (Riddick et al., 1999; Seo, Abbott, & Hawkins, 2008; Shessel & Reiff, 1999). Therefore, it is important to report on

the literature that addresses the social acceptance of persons with LD. This acceptance can play a significant part in influencing the perceptions of YALD about their academic and social experiences throughout their school career. As mentioned earlier, arguments are made within the literature suggesting that LD is a social construction (e.g., Baglieri & Knopf, 2004; Brantlinger, 2004; Reid & Valle, 2004). Reid and Valle (2004) claimed that the meaning of LD is “not objective fact; [but is] historically and culturally determined” (p. 466). Society has a powerful role in deciding normality, and those who do not fit this condition are considered different, creating social barriers (Alexander-Passe, 2008; Barga, 1996; Brantlinger, 2004). For instance, students with LD are “more likely to be rejected, not accepted, and neglected by [their] peers” (Mishna, 2003, p. 337). Many students with LD feel “socially awkward” (McNulty, 2003, p. 365). Because social acceptance is very important for students, not being able to conform to their understanding of a social norm makes them feel like they are being “othered” (Reid & Valle, 2004, p. 477) and are being left out of social interactions by their peers.

Peer relationships and acceptance can be important for students, particularly for students with LD within the inclusive classroom. Estell, Jones, Pearl, Van Acker, Farmer, and Rodkin (2008) suggested that a dichotomy exists within the notion of effectiveness of inclusive classrooms for students with LD within the literature. One argument is that the placement of students with LD within an inclusive classroom provides opportunities for these students to become a part of their classroom community. However, the counter argument is that, within the inclusive classroom, students with LD

do not get the academic attention they need from the teacher; as well, inclusion may provide challenges for gaining peer acceptance and integration from their non-learning disabled peers (Estell et al., 2008). While in specialized classroom settings, many students with LD are able to have a sense of collaboration with their peers and feel more comfortable with learning than in their regular classroom (Klingner, Vaughn, Schumm, Cohen, & Forgan, 1998). However, it can be a difficult decision for some students with LD to choose between having the academic attention within a specialized setting or remaining in their regular classroom for the chance to have more social acceptance amongst their peers.

Estell et al. (2008) studied the trajectories of popularity and social preference among elementary students with and without LD through a longitudinal (Grade 3 to Grade 6) research study, which used social cognitive mapping, best friend nominations, peer-perceived popularity, and social preference instruments to measure popularity and preference. Sampling 1,361 students (678 girls and 683 boys), only 55 of the students (21 girls and 34 boys) were identified as having LD. This small number makes it difficult to generalize popularity and social preference for students with LD as the number of LD students within the study underrepresented this population. However, this weakness was identified by the researchers within the limitations section of the study and acknowledged the lack of generalizability from the research.

Estall et al.'s (2008) findings suggested that the students with LD were rated as having lower popularity and social acceptance than their peers because as a part of their LD, these students lacked the social skills and abilities to achieve average levels of social acceptance among their peers. Shessel and Reiff (1999) reported that previous research which focused on the social competence and social status of students with LD proposed a reciprocity model of peer status to help understand the hypotheses for why poor social skills and low social acceptance arise for students with LD. The model suggested that several factors including "self-perception, processing deficits, emotional health, differential treatment, and more limited social interaction opportunities" (Shessel & Reiff, 1999, p. 313) may influence the social skills and abilities of students with LD. Furthermore, students who do not have a learning disability often have a negative perception of students with LD, thus decreasing the acceptance of these students within classroom peer relationships (May & Stone, 2010). Having lower popularity and social acceptance within a classroom can make for difficult experiences for students with LD, which can further lead to a feeling or sense of being "different" (Alexander-Passe, 2008, p. 293) than their peers because of their LD label.

Having a Learning Disability Label

Barga (1996) defined labeling as "anything functioning as a means of identification or as a descriptive term, formal or informal" (p. 414). Reid and Valle (2004) described the current practice in the United States, which was similar to Canadian practice for becoming identified with a learning disability, as a long and intensive process

where the student who is considered to be outside of their appropriate grade level in achievement is the object of observation and documentation by the teacher who reports this information to their administration. In Ontario, an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) is made to determine what evaluation is needed for the student. If further identification is needed, parents must consent for their child to be referred to a psychologist for assessment. After the administration of multiple psychological assessments, the psychologist discusses the results with a team of educators involved within the IPRC and the child's parents to determine whether the student was diagnosed with a learning disability and what accommodations are needed for the child through the development of an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for that particular child (OME, 2006). The student now has the label of a learning disability, a label that stays on their file throughout their schooling.

The labeling of a student with a learning disability can be understood as being both a positive and a negative process for the student. Barga (1996) interviewed nine students with LD (age range of 18–45) about how they managed their LD in school from Kindergarten to college. As well, Barga's methodology included classroom observations, reviewing academic files of the participants, and collecting other documents related to the study of the participants—specific documents were not identified. A weakness to this study was the wide age range of the participants; a range of 27 years was a large difference given the number of changes and the evolutions of the educational system over this time. Through standard theme analysis, the participants' interviews reported that the

labeling of LD can be a positive experience for students with LD because it was seen as being their stepping stone for their peers, teachers, and parents to resolve any confusion about understanding the students' academic difficulties within the classroom (Barga, 1996). After an individual is identified with a learning disability, efforts are usually made to help determine what works and what does not work for the student in the classroom to help create a more positive learning environment (Higgins et al., 2002).

However, being labeled as something that does not coincide with society's norm can be a challenge for students with LD. Sometimes when a student is labeled with a learning disability, a stigmatization about their academic ability may follow. The participants in Barga's (1996) study also related how the identification of the LD label often made teachers and peers treat them differently and in a demeaning manner. For example, the participants stated that teachers and peers would talk "slower and louder" (p. 416) as if they were unable to understand anything. This type of reaction to LD labels supports why it is important to have more recent study with a smaller age range amongst participants as an extension off Barga's study to provide further elaboration about labeling experiences and the effect on students with LD.

Self-Esteem Issues for Students With LD

It is evident within the literature that it is important to understand how students with LD develop a positive or negative sense of identity and sense of their ability (Burden, 2008). Burden (2008) described self-esteem as a person's feelings of competence and well-being that are shaped by the comparisons made to others and by

how others interpret their perceptions of them. This process can be very difficult for all students because it is through making comparisons that they develop an understanding of what the social norms are, and they immediately notice any differences about themselves. This desire to be a part of the norm is especially true for adolescents because “conforming to the norms of their peers [is] extremely important in the development of self-esteem” (Singer, 2005, p. 421). For students with LD, this alignment of themselves with the norm becomes an uncomfortable task, because they are not only making social comparisons, but they are making academic comparisons as well. Students with LD often compare their own academic ability with that of their non-LD peers, which can make students with LD vulnerable to low self-esteem and influence how they participate within their classrooms (Singer, 2005).

Furthermore, understanding the students’ perspectives about their learning disability is an insightful way to gain a deeper knowledge of LD. As well, it allows for knowing how students with LD see themselves because of their learning disability. Burden and Burdett’s (2007) interview study reported the descriptions of metaphors used to describe dyslexia by 80 dyslexic boys between the ages of 11 and 16, who attended a reputable academic and athletic boarding school for LD students. Before being able to critique the study, a few considerations must be mentioned. The findings of this study are based only on male students with dyslexia, making it difficult to apply to female students with LD. Furthermore, the participants were chosen from a prestigious specialized school for students with LD where the researchers said that “low self-esteem and feelings of

academic anxiety were relatively rare” (p. 78) amongst the participants. Thus their comparison to non-LD peers would not be applicable outside of this situation because students attending this elite school might be expected to already have a higher self-esteem than students within a regular classroom. However, students within Burden and Burdett’s study did report some information that illustrated the importance of knowing LD through the voices of those with a learning disability.

Through the use of metaphors, the participants within Burden and Burdett’s (2007) study were able to reflect on the processes of becoming identified as having dyslexia; as well, the metaphors provide a means of seeing how students with LD see themselves in terms of their self-esteem when they are in a classroom. Burden and Burdett (2007) stated that, “metaphors enable us to see aspects of reality that the metaphor’s production helps to constitute” (p. 78). Moreover, it is important within research that students with LD consider how they have been able to make sense of their learning disability to help educate others, especially teachers. After students explain their LD to teachers, teachers can better understand the exceptionality and may provide a more inclusive environment and positive education experiences (Burden & Burdett, 2007). Two categories of metaphors for dyslexic barriers emerged from the interview data after the researchers conducted a meta-analysis: surmountable and insurmountable barriers. An example from a participant within the study of a surmountable barrier about having dyslexia was “...like a maze with doors that you’ve got to unlock, so you have to keep persisting” (p. 79). Whereas a metaphor of an insurmountable barrier for dyslexia was

provided as “just someone smart trying to do something they can’t. They can’t get out what they’re trying to do” (p. 80). How a student with LD understands their learning disability may influence how they compare themselves to their peers. Additionally, this comparison may have a negative influence on their self-esteem and educational experiences if the student does not have the support of the teacher within a classroom for his or her learning disability.

Different Classroom Settings

From the moment students with LD enter a mainstream school, most are immediately put at a disadvantage because of their short-term memory and their slow and poor phonological awareness, causing them difficulties with reading speed and fluency and confusion for understanding the task (Alexander-Passe, 2008). From these difficulties, it can be understood how students with LD participate within their classroom may become affected. Within the LD literature, much research is focused on the experiences of students with LD within their current classroom (Firth et al., 2010; O’Rourke & Houghton, 2006; Polychroni et al., 2006; Richardson, 1996). Therefore, reporting the perceptions from YALD may provide a further enriched understanding to education experiences across a number of classroom settings for students with LD.

For students with LD, the regular classroom setting can be an intimidating and challenging environment (Barga, 1996; O’Rourke & Houghton, 2006). Thus far, the literature reviewed has addressed the issue of inclusion within the regular classroom setting. As previously discussed the social acceptance of students with LD within the

regular classroom can influence how students with LD feel within the classroom. Additionally, often within the regular education classroom, teachers do not know how to accommodate students with LD and, thus, their academic needs may not be met (Gwernan-Jones & Burden, 2010; Moats, 2009; Neufeld & Hoskyn, 2005; Paterson, 2007; Richardson, 1996; Wadlington et al., 2008). The physical inclusion within the classroom may not be enough for students with LD to feel comfortable to engage within the classroom; more specialized services may need to be offered for students with LD to help with their academic inclusion within the classroom.

Specialized Education Settings

Reporting on literature that examined the context of the special education classrooms for students with LD gave a different perspective on education experiences from the students with LD. Different types of special education classrooms or programs may exist within a school, each providing a different type of service for students with LD (Nugent, 2008; Wiener & Tardif, 2004). Nugent's (2008) well-conducted interview study evaluated and compared three types of special education settings (specialized schools, reading units, and regular resource provision) within 16 schools in Ireland. The participants within Nugent's study were 100 diagnosed dyslexics aged 8–13 and were completing two years of at least one form of aforementioned special education services. Through the use of structured and semi-structured interviews, the participants were asked a variety of questions, about topics ranging from friendships and acceptance to advice for

other students. Furthermore, questionnaires were administered to the parents to allow for further elaboration and clarification of students' responses in the interview.

Using content analysis, Nugent's (2008) findings suggested that students felt more comfortable within specialized schools because they were among peers who also had a learning disability. However, the students did report that they had social concerns about having to leave their class and school to go to the specialized school. After completing the two-year program in their specialized school, most students reported that they wanted to attend a regular secondary school so that they could feel "normal" (p. 199).

Unfortunately, this study did not identify how students with LD transitioned from their specialized school back into a regular school. Students within the reading units and regular resource provision said that they were much more uncomfortable using these services because it made them feel different and "weird" (p. 201). Responses from the students were supported by the responses from the parents' questionnaires, indicating that their children were happier when they attended a specialized school for their learning disability rather than when their children were in a resource room. These results confirm that the type of classroom setting can influence how students with LD experience the classroom.

Nugent's (2008) rationale for conducting this study was that there was a lack of knowledge about special education services from the views of the students. As well, studies often tend to focus on one form of special education setting with limited sampling and triangulation. Therefore, through examining different types of classroom settings, a

deeper understanding from the perspectives of the students with LD can be gained about their education experiences. Nugent's study was based within the Ireland educational context, so consideration must be made in applying these findings to how different classroom settings may affect student experiences within the Canadian education context. Expanding on Nugent's study by placing it within a Canadian context could bring further knowledge about the effectiveness of different classroom settings for students with LD.

Addressing the issue of special education services from the perspective of the students is important because their voices are not often reported within the literature (Burden & Burdett, 2007; Nugent, 2008). Being pulled out of the classroom to attend specialized programs can create a sense of social awkwardness amongst students with LD and their non-LD peers (Barga, 1996; Klingner et al., 1998; McNulty, 2003). Klingner et al. (1998) used the voices of 32 students (16 with LD and 16 without LD; 4 fourth graders, 14 fifth graders, and 14 sixth graders) to ascertain whether they preferred inclusion or pull-out services. Many students with LD had mixed feelings about being in special education settings. However, through structured interviews the participants within Klingner et al.'s study discussed, that overall, pull-out services were preferred to inclusion. Students with LD reported that pull-out services, such as special education classrooms, did provide better learning environments because more direct attention was given to the student (Howard & Tryon, 2002; Klingner et al., 1998), but in the regular classroom, there was a better chance for social interaction and friendships with their peers (Hutchinson, Freeman, Steiner Bell, 2002; Klingner et al., 1998; Wiener & Tardif, 2004).

This identification of having social interaction within the regular classroom within Klingner et al.'s study contradicts what previous literature has stated about the lack of social acceptance of students with LD within the regular classroom (Alexander-Passe, 2008; Barga, 1996; Estell et al., 2008; Mishna, 2003; Reid & Valle, 2004). The findings from previous studies are from participants of various ages, grades, races, and education systems, which may influence the difference in perceptions about going to special education classrooms. Therefore, this ambiguity underlies the importance of acquiring the perceptions of YALD to reflect upon their time within elementary and secondary school to understand their education experiences and how they progressed through grades.

Coping Strategies

Having a learning disability is not something that can be forgotten. It is a part of daily living and students have to learn how to deal with their LD and how to become a self-advocate for themselves (Firth et al., 2010; Shessel & Reiff, 1999). Students with LD may use various coping strategies, both positive and negative, to help compensate for their difficulties within the classroom. Alexander-Passe (2006) administered three standardized tests to measure self-esteem, coping, and depression amongst 19 dyslexic teenagers (12 males and 7 females) with a mean academic year of Grade 11. The purpose of the study was to examine how dyslexic teenagers cope within the classroom. The three standardized tests administered were: (a) the Culture-Free Self-Esteem Inventory (CFSEI), designed to investigate four types of self-esteem (general, social, academic, and parental); (b) the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS), designed to

investigate multi-dimensions of coping; and (c) the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II), designed for assessing the severity of depression. The researcher administered all three tests to all participants and data were analyzed based on scoring recommended by the instruments' manuals.

The scores from the CFSEI test yielded that the participants had lower self-esteem than an average population; as well, the CISS results revealed that the participants used more task and emotion-orientated coping strategies than the normed data. Task-orientated coping is based upon students using their talents and hobbies as ways to help their understanding of their learning disability. In this type of situation, the students are demonstrating a strong desire to succeed, and they rely on their strengths and the encouragement of others to help them attain their desired academic success. Alexander-Passe (2006) claimed that, when dyslexic students display traits of “expres[sion], pro-activi[ty], search for self-worth, persistence, stubbornness and determination” (p. 258), they are engaging in a form of task-based coping. Furthermore, most dyslexic students may react to their difficulties within the classroom by withdrawing emotionally, becoming aggressive, and compensating by obtaining negative attention from others. Emotional-orientated coping occurs when dyslexic students demonstrate “traits of frustration, lack of confidence, self-doubt, sensitiv[ity] to criticism, behavioral problems, competitiveness disorders, self-blame, and aggressiveness” (p. 259). Finally, the BDI-II test yielded that these participants generally had normal depression ratings. However,

Alexander-Passe noted that these results are specific to this small number of participants and are unsuitable for generalization to all dyslexic teenagers.

Understanding the coping strategies used by students with LD may help with unpacking the experiences of YALD and how they progressed through school. These strategies should not be underestimated, as they are very powerful tools used by students with LD within the classroom. The literature reviewed identified some common coping strategies used by students with LD. These included: (a) working hard and rising to academic standards, (b) lowering one's academic standards, (c) seeking support from parents and teachers, (d) avoiding academic comparisons with peers, (e) hiding their weaknesses, (f) fighting back through inappropriate behavior, and (g) explaining their learning disability to others (Alexander-Passe, 2006; Barga, 1996; Shessel & Reiff, 1999; Singer, 2005; Singer, 2008). Through the use of these strategies, students with LD felt that they were able to manage their learning disability and reduce their embarrassment and humiliation within the classroom, so that they did not feel different from their peers and thus resulted in more positive experiences in school (Alexander-Passe, 2006; Barga, 1996; Singer, 2005; Singer, 2008).

Conclusion

Students with LD face many academic and social challenges within the classroom and school environment. The literature reviewed has provided a comprehensive understanding of the topic and presents an enriched awareness of the situation faced by

students with LD. For the purposes of understanding experiences of students with LD, it is important to hear the students' voices.

Learning disabilities are very complex; thus, I reviewed multiple aspects in the literature. The complexity of LD can cause a lack of understanding to emerge within the classroom and in the home. Because of the lack of knowledge held by parents and teachers, students with LD often do not receive the support and accommodations needed to achieve academic successes. Perceptions made by others about the ability of students with LD may influence the amount of support provided to these students within a classroom. This absence of support can make students with LD experience the classroom in a very different way than their non-LD peers. Students with LD can be left to face the challenges of their learning disability on their own and often encounter many negative experiences within their education influencing their self-esteem (Burden, 2008; Lackey & Margalit, 2006). The perceptions that are often held by society about LD can create a negative environment for students with LD within the classroom making some of these students question their academic and social abilities through comparisons to their non-LD peers (Klassen & Lynch, 2007). Thus, unpacking the education experiences of YALD through their voices and their stories may enhance our understanding of LD to provide better help for students with LD within the classroom.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter describes the qualitative methodology used in this study and outlines the specific methods used to collect and analyze the data. I begin by describing the research design then the procedure of selecting participants with a description of all three participants. I then explain the process of data collection using semi-structured interviews. Finally, I outline the approach used for analyzing each participants' interview data individually followed by cross-case analysis of the interview data.

Research Design

This research is a qualitative interview study that was designed to reveal the voices of three¹ YALD to describe their experiences within classrooms. The use of qualitative methods allows for capturing and understanding the participants' perceptions of their experiences (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, qualitative research provides "richness and holism with great potential for revealing [the] complexity" (Miles & Huberman, 1994 as referenced in Shessel & Reiff, 1999, p. 305) of having a learning disability. Moreover, using the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews, this study describes the perceptions of school experiences of YALD to examine the context within which the meaning of LD is rooted for these individuals. The intent was to provide a greater awareness about LD.

Participant Selection

This study adopted a purposeful sampling selection process. For participants to be eligible to take part in the study, they had to: (a) have had a psychological assessment when in elementary or secondary school and have been classified as having an identified learning disability; (b) have self-identified as having a learning disability as they progressed through school; (c) be comfortable with describing personal educational experiences; and (d) be between 18–21 years of age currently. Much of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, used the same selection process for participants and, in a number of studies, another criterion was having undergone a psychological assessment (Ingesson, 2007; Macdonald, 2009; McNulty, 2003; Nugent, 2008; Polychroni et al., 2006; Riddick et al., 1999; Terras et al., 2009). Selecting participants aged 18–21 instead of an older sample enabled the participants to have more recent recollections of their school experiences. Many studies that have examined adults with LD have had a much wider age range (20–30 years), which contributed to varied experiences amongst their participants (e.g., Barga, 1996; Riddick et al., 1999; Shessel & Reiff, 1999).

As well, research has indicated that students with a learning disability have a high rate—68% (McGillivray & Baker, 2009); 70% (Mayes, Calhoun, & Crowell, 2000); 94% (Brook & Broaz, 2005)—of the sample identified having a comorbidity with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) with their LD (Hutchinson, Freeman, & Berg, 2004). Therefore, it was difficult to select participants with a learning disability who did not have a comorbidity with another exceptionality. As the focus of the research is on

learning disabilities, the questioning was directed at getting the participants to respond about their learning disability without unduly emphasizing on their other exceptionalities, unless the participant mentioned that their other exceptionalities influenced their learning disability.

These criteria are critical for participant selection for this study. Using them, I enhance the validity and reliability of the findings of the study. From potential participants, I selected three participants, two males and one female, who met the criteria for the study. These participants provided an information-rich data set for this study and helped me to understand the phenomenon for each participant.

Recruitment process. Recruitment for participants was carried out through Queen's On-Line To Success (OLTS) program based at Queen's University Regional Assessment and Resource Centre (RARC) (see Appendix A). Selecting participants from this program automatically allowed potential participants to meet the first two criteria for selection: to participate in the program, they must have an identified learning disability by a psychological assessment from their school and have self-identified as having a learning disability while participating in the program. This program provides Grade 11 students who have LD and who are planning to attend a post-secondary institution with the skills and strategies to help transition and succeed in their post-secondary education. It is "an 8 week on-line course...designed to help [them] learn about: (1) [their] learning disability, (2) self-advocacy skills, (3) adaptive technology that works for [them], and (4) learning strategies for [their] specific program in University or College" (RARC, 2010).

An email containing information describing the study and my contact information (see Appendix B) was circulated through the program's contact list allowing graduates of the program an opportunity to respond if interested in participating. Potential participants interested in the study contacted the RARC member who had sent them the recruitment email, and she provided their contact information to the researcher. After receiving the contact information of potential participants, I contacted him/her through email and provided further information including a letter of information (see Appendix C) about the study as well as information about myself having a learning disability, to initiate rapport development with the participant. When the potential participants decided they wanted to be a part of the study, they replied providing a few sentences about themselves and why they were interested in participating in this study, which helped with the selection process. The selected participants were then asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix D) stating that they understood what the study was about and how their information would be used.

Selecting three individuals from the program which graduates up to 40 students a year, I was able to access and choose individuals with a range of educational experiences for maximum variability from those who completed the OLTS program and are now either pursuing a post-secondary education or are part of the workforce. However, it must be acknowledged that using a program such as OLTS for recruitment is a specialized group; data collected from this study are not representative of the whole YALD population. The purpose of this program is to help to teach students with LD strategies to

help them transition and succeed in post-secondary. Students within the program already have an awareness of the amount of self-advocacy that is needed to receive necessary accommodations within their classroom. Therefore, the participants recruited from the OLTS program may have higher self-advocacy and willingness to self-identify their LD than other potential participants from different sources of recruitment.

Recruitment for the study followed the researcher receiving university ethical clearance to conduct the research in October 2011 (see Appendix E). This research was granted approval and conformed to the standards set by the TriCouncil Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (1998) and met all of the Queen's General Research Ethics Board (GREB) criteria. I also completed the required Course in Human Research Participant Protections (CHRPP). Confidentiality of all personal information was ensured for the participants and they were informed that all information collected was used directly for the purposes of this study. Furthermore, the names of all of the participants and teachers described within this study have been changed to pseudonyms to help maximize confidentiality.

Description of participants. The first participant was named Zack. He was a 21-year old male with a learning disability and ADHD. He was very energetic and passionate about telling his experiences to help others understand what he experienced in school. Zack attended elementary and secondary school within the Kingston region. He is now a college graduate with a diploma from a Child and Youth Worker program.

The second participant was named Laura. She too was 21 years old. She was a student with non-verbal learning disability and she has hearing loss in her right ear. She was a quiet girl, but she had plenty to say about her educational experiences and she came prepared with her own notes of what she wanted to say to aide her in her interview. Laura also attended elementary and secondary school within the Kingston region. She was a second year university student who has made the Dean's List and is now considering doing graduate studies later in her career.

Finally, the third participant was named Shane. He was a 19-year old male with a learning disability. He was quiet but also delighted to discuss his experiences through elementary and secondary school to assist in this research. Shane was within Kingston region for elementary school but then moved to the Bay of Quinte region and then back to Kingston region during his time in secondary school. He was in his last year of college and is planning to graduate this spring with a diploma in Medical Laboratory Technician.

My Role as a Researcher

My biases and experiences from my learning disability have shaped the lens through which I have approached this research. However, as the researcher for this study, I had to prevent my personal experiences from interfering with design and data collection, but I did communicate with Zack, Laura, and Shane about my background to help build a rapport with them before their first interview. My role as the researcher was to collect and analyze the data provided by the three participants. Furthermore, my role was to provide a supportive environment for all of the participants to share their

experiences of having a learning disability. The objective of the interview was to create an informal atmosphere where the participant and I engaged in a discussion of their educational career. However, during the interviews, I had to remind myself not to let my personal experiences and biases come through in the interviews questions and in my responses during the interviews. This was a difficult task for me because there were many times during all of the interviews where I could relate to their experiences and I wanted to express that to them. Nevertheless, I did not want to take away from their moment of telling their experiences and thoughts, since that was one of the purposes of the study. I tried to create a secure and comfortable place for them, to help them feel less anxious about their interview.

Data Collection

The method of data collection for this qualitative research consisted of two face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews (Barga, 1996; Creswell, 2007; McNulty, 2003). The use of semi-structured interviews within this qualitative study provided the participants with the freedom to elaborate on any of the probing questions asked by the researcher without being restricted by the question (Barga, 1996; Burden & Burdett, 2007; Creswell, 2007; McNulty, 2003; Nugent, 2008; Singer, 2005). This type of interview allowed for understanding the “anger, frustration, anxiety, or whatever” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 251) the participant was feeling about their prior school experiences. Since the experiences of all of the participants were unique and personal, it would have been difficult to have a more structured interview, because the essence of the data could

be lost if the participants did not elaborate on their experiences and tell their stories. At the same time, specific interview questions were used as a guide to direct the interview and help the researcher remain focused. Furthermore, the participants interview questions were designed in a sensitive way to probe the participants' experiences and feelings to help them communicate what they experienced in their school years without leading to distress for the participant.

The interview questions were directed towards asking participants to explain different classroom organizations, how teachers accommodated them, their social relationships with their peers, and what they wanted others to know about LD in order to help reduce the gap in knowledge (see Appendix F). Specifically, some of the interview questions directly asked the participants to explain what they liked and did not like, about the academic and social aspects of elementary and secondary school. Because this could have been a sensitive subject for the participants, the questions were asked with the highest level of sensitivity and respect for the participant. A disadvantage of conducting semi-structured interviews, if a participant is not articulate or hesitates to elaborate is that responses can become rather terse. The interview questions were sent to the participants a week before the interview, so the participants could familiarize themselves with the type of questions I was going to ask them and thus allow them to prepare themselves for their interview.

The first interview was audio-recorded with their permission and ranged in time from 25 to 90 minutes for the three participants. After each interview, I transcribed verbatim the audio-recordings and created a brief two-page summary of the interview to read to each of the participants in their follow-up interview. The follow-up interviews were conducted to allow each participant to listen the summary of their first interview and elaborate on any information they wanted to add or change. Another purpose of the follow-up interview was to assure them that their stories were worth telling (McNulty, 2003).

The duration between each participant's first interview and their follow-up varied. Zack's follow-up was two months later because his first interview was in mid-November followed by the holiday season and the move of RARC, the location for conducting all of the interviews, to a new location on campus. This meant that there was a longer delay before Zack's follow-up interview, which was conducted in mid-January. Laura's follow-up interview was conducted one week after her first interview. Shane did not have a follow-up interview. Because of his busy schedule, it was not convenient to have a follow-up interview with him. But in a chance encounter at a bus stop, I explained to Shane that I could send him his summary through email and he could respond with any additions or changes. He agreed to it being sent by email as it would be easier for him to look at in his busy schedule than to meet for another interview. Unfortunately, I did not receive a response from Shane, leaving me with the assumption that he agreed with his summary and did not have any changes to make.

Additionally, I took field notes during the interviews to record my reflections and any additional thoughts or questions from the interviews that needed to be elaborated on by the participant. These field notes added to the reliability of the study.

Interview site. The interview site provided a quiet and supportive atmosphere for conducting the interviews. Each interview site was in a quiet room within RARC that had a comfortable environment, including windows, cushioned chairs, and refreshments for the participant. Providing a comfortable and accommodating environment is an important part of the interview process. If a participant did not feel comfortable within a room, then he or she might not have felt comfortable telling me about personal classroom experiences. Furthermore, I asked the participants during the interview if they were okay in telling their experiences, and if they were not, they should not feel pressure to have to stay in the study because there were other individuals who could participate. They were also reminded that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. As well, a RARC staff member who had experience in counseling agreed to counsel any of the participants who became distressed during or after the interview. This support was not needed by any of the three participants.

Data Analysis

This research used a thematic analysis of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). After completing the interviews, I transcribed the data verbatim from the audio recordings for further analysis, as was done in many published studies (e.g., Ingesson, 2007; Nugent, 2008; Wadlington et al., 2008). Interviews were analyzed separately to allow for

individual stories to be told to understand each participant's characteristics and context. Then I conducted a cross-case analysis for themes common amongst all of the interviews. The data analysis began with identifying data segments within the transcription of the interviews, which then were coded with descriptive codes that identified emic and etic codes (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Subsequently, codes identified were then grouped into inductive and deductive categories developed through constant comparison of the data. Further analysis continued with finding patterns grouping amongst the categories that helped to develop a framework for reporting the findings from the data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). While analyzing the data through the generation of codes, categories, and themes, I kept memos within a field notes journal to show the process of thinking and evolution during the analysis stage. This analysis of the data provided a deeper understanding of the data, which assisted in answering my research questions, including insight as to how educators might accommodate their students within their classrooms.

Chapter 4

Results

In this chapter, I describe the individual experiences of the three participants of this study—Zack, Laura, and Shane—using themes that emerged from the data. The documentation of each case begins with a description of the participant to show his or her individuality and provide an overview of and context for his or her experiences; these details are followed by a discussion of themes that distinguish each participant’s individual experience from the others’. See Table 1 for the participants’ individual theme analysis. Commonalities amongst Zack’s, Laura’s, and Shane’s themes are discussed in Chapter 5.

Zack

Description of Zack

Zack was 21 years old. He was diagnosed with a learning disability in reading, writing, and numeration when he was 12 years old. Zack was very energetic, enthusiastic, and passionate about telling his experiences. Even through recruitment, Zack expressed that he could not “wait to describe more [about his learning experience] in person” when he provided some background information about himself. Throughout data collection, Zack’s energy kept growing as he discussed different aspects about his educational experiences, especially regarding the importance of educating others including teachers, parents and peers about exceptionalities to reduce misconceptions. He frequently expressed himself through raising his voice, hand gestures, and movement to help

Table 1

Themes From Analysis of Three Participants

Zack	Laura	Shane
<p>1) Self-Awareness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Who I am as a Learner b) Dealing With His Weaknesses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Hyperactivity ii) Managing Hyperactivity iii) Frustrating Experience <p>2) Teachers' Responsibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Influence of Teachers b) Teaching Style <p>3) Social Acceptance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Peer Relations b) Hurtful Actions 	<p>1) Complexity of Exceptionalities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Interplay Between Learning Disability and Hearing Loss b) Managing Her Learning Disability and Hearing Loss c) Working With Her Strengths <p>2) Social Challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Being Introverted b) Friendship c) Wanting Help 	<p>1) Difference Between Elementary and Secondary School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Transition From Elementary to Secondary School b) Difference In Teachers <p>2) Challenges of Having a Learning Disability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Struggles Through School

illustrate the passion behind his explanations. He described himself as an extrovert and said, “When I am around people I get so pumped up. I am a social butterfly when I am with people, and I enjoy it” (January 17; 213–214). This type of eagerness led to very compelling interviews.

As well as having a learning disability, he was also diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), and Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD). Defining these terms will help provide a general understanding of the conditions that Zack dealt with on a daily basis. ADHD is a developmental disorder usually diagnosed in childhood and young adolescence. According to the Attention Deficit Disorder Association (ADDA), the most common features of ADHD include distractibility (poor sustained attention to tasks), impulsivity (impaired impulse control and delay of gratification), and hyperactivity (excessive activity and physical restlessness) (ADDA, 1998). Furthermore, ADHD can be broken down into three subtypes, including: (1) combined type; (2) predominantly inattentive type; and (3) predominantly hyperactivity–impulsivity type (ADDA, 1998). Zack was diagnosed as having the combined type of ADHD. GAD is characterized by persistent, excessive, and unrealistic worry about everyday things (Anxiety Disorders Association of Canada, 2007). Zack also suffered from SAD, which occurs when a child has excessive feelings of fear of leaving or being separated from their primary caregiver, usually the child’s parents (ADAC, 2007). These brief definitions provide a sense of the complexity of Zack’s exceptionalities.

Zack clearly stated in the interview, “I don’t let [my learning disability and ADHD] define me anymore” (November 17; 23); this understanding came to him after years of identifying as “I’m Zack and I have ADD” (November 17; 24), but eventually he came to believe “that’s not me anymore...it is not who I am, it is more of a characteristic that I have” (November 17; 24 & 29). Through new understanding, Zack has been able to become more comfortable with himself and his learning.

Self-Awareness

When asked about how his learning disability and his ADHD affect each other Zack asserted that “it sucks ‘cause, [with] the comorbidity, you have one thing you are going to have a couple other things, you know. It is brutal, so ADHD makes my learning disability so much harder” (January 17; 789–791). Zack explained that he often had difficulty understanding what his learning disability and ADHD meant. Even during testing, psychologists would use complex terminology to describe what was happening rather than simply telling him “step by step” (January 17; 667) what these diagnoses meant in terms of what these exceptionalities do and what can be done to accommodate them. Zack said that to help understand, “I read books and research about ADHD all the time because it’s talking about myself. And I feel like, when they give examples, I’m like, I can relate to that” (January 17; 668–670). Relating to examples from different sources of research helped Zack to understand his exceptionalities better, which also helped him to understand himself better. Zack further described his feelings of having a learning disability and ADHD as a love-hate relationship because there are aspects of his

exceptionalities that he considers a gift; Zack said that without them, he probably would not have had the same experiences that have allowed him to grow as an individual and have enhanced his ability to work with children in his profession. However, he claimed that there are days when he hates having ADHD because “some days I just want to be ‘normal’...I just [want to] be able to do things easily and efficiently, yet I know that I will never be able to” (November 17; 20–22). So, to further his learning, Zack had to understand exactly what his strengths and weaknesses were so that he knew what he needed to do to succeed.

Who I am as a learner. Zack articulated that the curriculum used in schools has a strict definition of intelligence as being good at reading, writing, and arithmetic and that students with more creative skills are often overlooked. For him, this was a challenge for his engagement within the classroom because he believed that intelligence should include much more than being a good reader and writer. Because of this discrepancy, being in a classroom made Zack feel “confined and constricted” (November 17, 2011; 709), and he “couldn’t let my ideas flow” (November 17; 709). Zack came to perceive that the classroom “is not where I learn” (January 17; 367), and he preferred being outside of the classroom for his learning because “I feel learning outside the classroom [is] so much more than what a classroom does” (January 17; 238–239). As well, Zack believed that learning in the classroom was difficult for him because, unless he had an interest in the subjects being taught, it was much more challenging for him to focus his energy to concentrate on the material.

Having an interest in school subjects was more possible for Zack in secondary school because he had the freedom to choose classes that he wanted to take. Within elementary school, there was little choice of what classes to take as the curriculum was set for each grade. However, in secondary school, to accompany the mandatory classes that often highlighted his learning disability, such as English and math, Zack had the opportunity to select classes that were more focused on his strengths as a learner and his interests because “whatever I am interested in I will focus [on] like no other” (November 17, 2011; 45–46). For Zack these classes included

Living and Working with Children, history, peer tutoring — you know, anything like that I would be really into, and that part of [secondary] school I liked ‘cause I got to learn stuff I was into...and I will get fantastic marks. (November 17; 46–49 & 172)

Within these classes, he was able to work with his strengths to help succeed. Even in history class, when students had to complete projects, he could use his more creative skills to develop a project, such as using tea bags to antique the appearance of the pages. Putting these skills to use helped Zack see the progression of his work. Zack also expressed his interest in science in school, even though it was difficult and he did not do well in that class. He explained that, “science was really cool; science is difficult for me, but I still enjoy it...I don’t know if it was because of the science teacher, but I really enjoy science” (November 17; 166 & 170). Zack’s comment demonstrated his

recognition that having an interest in a subject did not always make the completion of the class an easy task.

Zack described himself as a kinesthetic learner because he learns best when he can do hands-on activities and move his body. An example that Zack provided in his second interview was the way in which he found his way to the interview location.

Directions were given in a written format. For him though,

Because I am a kinesthetic learner...coming here in this RARC building the first time was the hardest time 'cause I have never done it before, but [the second time] I took the exact same path that I took when I first got here [for the first interview]. 'Cause it's not hands-on, but I walked it, you know, and so I remember stuff like that instead of just seeing it be done...anything I do kinesthetically, I just remember. (January 17; 173–177)

He enjoyed classes more that allowed him to use more of a kinesthetic approach within his learning because this strategy allowed him to work with his strength of learning through movement to better accommodate his weaknesses.

Dealing with his weaknesses. Zack's learning disability and ADHD played an interconnecting role within his learning. Both of these exceptionalities caused distress for him; however, he said that his learning disability was more easily manageable than his ADHD. He explained it in the following words:

My learning disability sucks, but [my] ADHD just, I feel, sucks ten times more. I feel like I cannot work around [my ADHD], but I can work with my learning

disability, you know, with writing and stuff. There is technology to make it easier, not get around it but make it easier. But there is nothing getting around ADHD...I am trying to get away from the ADHD, but I know there is no bypassing that.

(January 17; 801–806)

Therefore, certain aspects of his ADHD were much more difficult for him to manage in school; namely, his hyperactivity and ways of managing his frustration.

Hyperactivity. A main challenge for Zack in school was dealing with his hyperactivity. He realized his high amounts of energy often caused distractions in the classroom for his teachers, peers, and himself. Because of these interruptions, he was labeled the class clown in early elementary school; however, Zack did not like having this label because he was not trying to be a distraction but was trying to deal with his hyperactivity. He wanted to explain to teachers that:

I don't mean to do it. I don't mean to be a disruption in the class. ...I don't mean to distract other kids...[but if I need to say something] and [the teacher] tells me to hold on a second, I can't. Like it is going to come out in some other form and I don't want to; its like I need to, and it sucks! (November 17; 950–955)

Zack further clarified that teachers often told him “one second” (November 17; 693) when he raised his hand to express an answer or share an opinion, so he regularly had to hold what he was going to say until the teacher was ready. However, this delay in being able to express himself caused Zack to redirect the energy that was going to be used in his verbal expression into other forms of activity. He said that his energy often came out

through his leg “jumping up and down” (November 17; 956) or “clicking pens” (November 17; 956). The result was people, including the teacher, would become annoyed.

Unfortunately, these distractions often led to his getting kicked out of class. For him, this was a terrible chain of events because “I’m in trouble, I’m sitting outside, I’m missing what [the teacher] is saying already so I have lost like ten minutes of what [the teacher] said” (November 17; 799–800). It would become a bad cycle for him because, when he returned to class, he would not know what the class learned when he was outside. Therefore, his anxiety would cause more energy to be expressed, and then he would be back outside in the hall.

Managing hyperactivity. To help manage his hyperactivity, Zack learned that two things helped: participating in sports and taking his medication. Although these two methods did not solve his hyperactivity, they did help to keep it at a manageable level. Zack found that participating in sports allowed him to have an outlet for his hyperactivity, and it was an activity that he and his father enjoyed together. He explained that his father always encouraged him to play sports since,

[S]ports without even having to say anything got me through a lot. Because I’d go into tournaments and play for a whole day or I would play for a couple of days, ... my energy was finally being used up enough for me to calm down and chill out. (January 17; 522–526)

Unfortunately, during school, the only opportunity for Zack to use his energy through sports was at recess or gym, which did not always allow him to use enough energy to calm him down.

Therefore, the second method he used to manage his hyperactivity was taking his medication. However, Zack stated that he did not like taking his medication; he explained that during school he often got his pill from the school secretary and then put it in his backpack. When asked why he did not enjoy taking his medication, he rationalized his actions through explaining that

I didn't take [Ritalin] because it only lasted two hours, and I could feel it come into my bloodstream, and I could feel it go out. Coming in was sweet 'cause I was, like, okay, let's go, but, coming out, I was depressed after. Every single day, I got home, [I] didn't want to do anything. And just that four-hour high from school wasn't worth the crash. And the Concerta was even worse because it was long-lasting. I had eight hours of awesomeness and then...that's why I didn't want to take it. (January 17; 140–145)

Thus, for Zack, the ability to focus his energy during the day was not worth the depressing feeling he experienced after the medication wore off. As well, Zack further justified his decision of not wanting to take his medication in that he “did not want to depend on pills to be normal or to function in daily life” (January 17; 146). He understood that, through not taking his medication, he would have to deal with his

hyperactivity on his own, but, for Zack, that was better than depending on medication that only provided short-term effects of “normal” behaviour (January 17; 146).

Frustrating experience. Dealing with his weaknesses in school was a very frustrating experience for Zack. There were often times in school when he felt stupid and did not understand why school was more challenging for him than for others. He explained that he often experienced these emotions in class when performing certain activities. A particular activity that was very vivid in Zack’s memory occurred in elementary school when it was time for SQUIRT (super quiet uninterrupted individual reading time). Zack was very expressive of how he did not enjoy this activity; he described it as being “the worst thing imaginable! It’s just—I had a book, and I look down; I wouldn’t read a thing, but I had to sit down for, like, 15 minutes quietly and uninterrupted, and it was brutal!” (November 17; 202–205). For him, this activity was difficult because having to be quiet for fifteen minutes was a challenge, and he started to feel “discouraged [since] I don’t want to read, right? ‘Cause I am not good at it so I started feeling stupid and stuff” (November 17; 206–207). Once this emotion began, it created a snowball effect for him because, then, the rest of his day would be lost because “I’m upset at myself, I don’t know what I am doing, it was bad” (November 17; 810).

The emotional distress of having difficult experiences in school can be overwhelming for individuals and they need the support of their parents. Zack was very clear in commenting that his parents were extremely supportive of him in school; he described that “they always tried...[and] they never even come close to giving up [on

me]” (November 17; 879–881). He also declared, “I don’t know what I would have done without them” (November 17; 891). However, Zack did express that, even with his parents’ constant support, there were times when it was difficult for him to get the understanding from them that he sometimes needed regarding his learning disability and ADHD. He explained that after a frustrating day at school, he often came home in tears and after explaining the experiences that had flustered him, he would ask, ““Do you understand what I am saying?’ and they would have to say ‘No, I don’t get what you are going through’” (November 17, 862–863). Zack found their reactions to be frustrating to deal with because, even with all of the support his parents gave him, “it is hard to hear your parents, who are supposed to know you, understand you [and] everything, and they just didn’t. They just didn’t get it, and they never will because they don’t have it” (November 17; 866–868). The frustration of needing that understanding from his parents but not always being able to get it meant that Zack also had to seek support from others.

Teachers’ Responsibility

Influence of teachers. Zack believed that his teachers played an important part in his life, and he said he still remembered certain teachers because “they had such an impact on me—negative or positive, it doesn’t matter” (November 17; 836). He further explained that a teacher’s ability to connect with his or her students has a significant impact on the influence that teacher will have over the students in the classroom. Zack believed that this connection with all students is important but especially “if [the teacher] can get to that child who is having a hard time or has a disability. If you can get to their

heart, if you just make that connection, that can be the game changer forever” (January 17; 737–740). This notion appeared to be important to Zack in his recollection of positive experiences with teachers in school.

He offered examples of different things teachers did that allowed him to create that connection. One example was when one of his elementary teachers played basketball with him and other students who were often excluded by their peers. These games allowed Zack to see his teacher in a different light: “You see them not as a teacher but as a human being” (January 17; 747). Furthermore, for Zack, a connection was made when he found someone who had similar experiences and understood what it was like to have these frustrations as a part of life. Making a connection with someone who is empathetic toward his frustrations made a significant difference for Zack. He remembered his Grade 9 science teacher because, on the first day of class, Zack went to tell the teacher,

‘Sorry if I’m hyper or if I’m distracted; I have ADHD.’ [The teacher] bends over and leans over and says, ‘So do I.’ And that was my first experience for a teacher having it, someone successful having it, and someone older than me having it.

And that did wonders for me because I got to see I can make it, I can be successful. And he was awesome! That gave [me] a lot of hope and optimism.

(November 17; 85–90)

Moments like these were very important in Zack’s life because they allowed him to connect with the teacher and helped him to develop self-confidence.

Teaching style. Zack recognized that different teaching styles and methods used within the classroom were essential in building a more inclusive environment for all students. An important quality that Zack admired in his teachers was their “attempt to include strategies on how to work with children with learning disabilities and ADHD” (November 17; 290–292). He emphasized the importance of teachers using different teaching methods as a positive way for them to include all of their students in learning and not just students with LD and ADHD. Moreover, Zack reported that it was important for teachers not to confine a student to his or her disorder, because “it doesn’t matter what the student has; it’s how they learn, [that’s] what’s important” (November 17; 1004–1005). Zack said that using different strategies was a good way for teachers to reach out to their students; however, he also understood that

[I]t is a learning process, and it is going to take time. And, yes, it is going to be stressful; yes, it is going to be annoying. But the outcome is going to be so much better than anything you have ever seen. (November 17; 1033–1035)

Furthermore, he believed that, when teachers break the mold and go beyond simply lecturing, the change made a difference for any student struggling within the classroom.

Teachers using different strategies often showed Zack that they understood what he needed from them in order to be included rather than excluded in the classroom.

Strategies such as “using more visual and auditory and kinesthetic things” (November 17; 293) such as colours, videos, slide shows, technology, and movement, were helpful for him because “we would do a bit of talking, and then we would get up and that getting up

and walking around, that's enough physical exercise for me to be okay. I'm back [to concentrating] now" (November 17; 293–296). The use of different teaching techniques allowed him to keep his interest in the material being taught and also provided him with an opportunity to work with his strengths in the classroom.

A particular figure who stood out to Zack for teaching differently was his Grade 11 English teacher, Mr. Thompson. Zack did not usually enjoy English classes; however, his teacher made the class one of the only English classes Zack actually liked because of the style in which it was taught. In describing what Mr. Thompson did in the classroom, Zack said that his teacher

[W]ould give us discussions, you know; he'd give us a topic and [say] 'go discuss.' And then we would just discuss with him [and] with other students. He wasn't as much...a teacher as he was a facilitator [in the discussions]. He would facilitate our conversations to go the way he wanted [them], but somehow we would make it always go where he wanted without him saying it. And, if it ever did [go off topic], he'd go, 'Okay, guys, you know, let's get back on track.'

(November 17; 518–523)

Furthermore, Zack explained that sometimes when the class was reading a book out loud on a particularly nice day, they would go outside to work. Mr. Thompson gave them a warning that, if they fooled around, they would go back inside to work. Zack was very expressive in proclaiming that Mr. Thompson allowing them to be "out of the classroom and get from that sitting down position was phenomenal!" (November 17; 333–335).

Zack believed that Mr. Thompson “did the perfect thing. He just used different techniques on how to teach us. He was amazing!” (November 17; 526–527).

As he was describing these different teaching methods, Zack mentioned that he liked routine and that having a routine can be a teaching strategy, as well. Having a routine was helpful for Zack as he was able to know the schedule for the day and know how to focus his energy. But he recognized the difficulty of keeping a routine because of unforeseeable situations that can interrupt it and ripple through the remainder of the day.

Social Acceptance

Peer relations. Making friends was not a difficult task for Zack. However, he recognized a difference between elementary and secondary school in the way that peers treated him. He commented on how, in elementary, he was not teased as much as he was in secondary; he further explained that comments made were not about his ability to read or write but more about his hyperactivity. He thought that, at that point in elementary there was less teasing because his classmates would often see him in the secretary’s office and ask, “‘Why are you waiting?’ ‘Oh, ‘cause I got to take my medicine.’ ‘For what?’” (January 17; 119–120), and then he would tell them that it was for his ADHD. In that way, Zack’s peers developed a better understanding of his exceptionality.

However, Zack noted that circumstances changed once he got to secondary school. He said, “I don’t know if it’s ‘cause of you’re in, like, [the] midst [of] puberty in [secondary school] and you are trying to be all cool, but that’s when, like,...I don’t know, that’s when I got teased a lot!” (November 17; 141–143). Zack further explained that in

secondary school he did not enjoy “the cliques, the stigmas that comes with a learning disability. I’m stupid, you know; you can’t do anything. I believe that is where most of the teasing came” (November 17; 238–240). As well, Zack did not like the social pressure on students to be cool and then automatic labeling as nerds if they did not conform. This concept was difficult for Zack to comprehend and accept because he said that he often found himself with a group of peers he thought were friends who would start to make fun of others. He did not participate, but then he found himself amongst a group of people who were being made fun of. These experiences were difficult for Zack because “I was friends with everybody but [I felt] I was being pulled to one side. And I didn’t know what to do” (November 17; 247–249). Being exposed to these types of social situations was, in Zack’s words, “annoying” (November 17; 249)

In our follow-up interview, Zack clarified that secondary school was not entirely bad and that it got better after a while. He said that “I became myself more in high school” (January 17; 47) and that finding a group of friends who “accepted me and who enjoyed my craziness was good” (January 17; 54–55). That was a turning point for him in secondary school because his group of friends provided the support he needed during school to help him deal with any social or academic tribulations.

Hurtful actions. Zack said that getting teased could happen not only outside the classroom but also inside as well and that it may not always consist of direct words but looks and body language that can also be hurtful to an individual. Zack commented on how he sometimes felt self-conscious doing certain things in class. One exercise that he

hated doing in class was when the class would be asked to write a paragraph or a short essay and then he would have to hand it to his peers for revisions. He described it as being “one of the worst [things] because they didn’t tease me about it but they would always look at me when I would spell really easy words wrong” (November 17; 152–154). Likewise, for him, it was a daunting task to raise his hand if he had a question in class because when he put his hand up in class, he felt like a “wounded gazelle on the Serengeti because every time I put up my hand people were whispering behind me” (November 17; 912–913). He became self-conscious about what others would say when he asked a question that had an obvious answer to others, but because of his learning disability, he needed further explanation or clarification. So, because of that feeling, Zack said, “I rarely put my hand up [in secondary school]” (November 17; 919); instead, he waited until after class to ask the teacher. His teachers would be upset with him and questioned, ““Why didn’t you ask [in class]?” Well, I am not going to ask when there are lions behind me” (November 17; 920–921). Even though he could not hear the comments and remarks being made about him behind his back, Zack still felt uncomfortable at times.

Summary

Zack’s knowledge of himself as person and a learner helped him to develop a better understanding of his learning disability and his ADHD. Through his explanations, Zack’s focus was often directed towards the effects his ADHD had on him during school. He reported his ADHD influenced his learning disability and it was sometimes difficult

for him to distinguish between the two exceptionalities. During both interviews, he was able to reflect upon his time in elementary and secondary school and comment on the experiences he had. Further reflection allowed Zack to recognize the influence—negative and positive—that his teachers had in his life. Zack believed the use of different teaching methods not only helped him with his learning in the classroom but they also helped others in their engagement. Even when the course of instruction may not be of interest, different pedagogy allowed Zack to use his energy and focus better on the material being taught. Throughout both interviews, Zack emphasized the importance of the need to educate others to help them understand how to work with students with exceptionalities. Without the understanding from others, the life of a student with any exceptionality is made much more difficult, inside and outside the classroom.

Laura

Description of Laura

Laura was 21 years old. She was interested in participating in this study because she wanted to help others by telling her story to increase awareness about challenges she has faced. Her shyness did not stop her from expressing her thoughts about the importance of educating teachers and peers about what it is like to have a learning disability. She brought along her own notes to help her remember what she wanted to say in the interview. At the end of the interview, I commented how I respected that she had brought in notes to help her. She explained,

I knew that if I did not write out [what I wanted to say], I would have [had] so much more trouble 'cause I can't do [improvisation]. I can't answer questions on the spot; I have to [have] a script and notes to help me with things. (January 26; 511–513)

During the interview, Laura placed much emphasis on the social issues that she encountered in school. Laura's sincerity and compassion for wanting to help others who are like her made her interview compelling.

When Laura was five years old, she was diagnosed with unilateral hearing loss in her right ear, meaning that she could only hear in her left ear. Additionally, Laura was diagnosed with a non-verbal learning disability (NLD) when she was in early elementary school. According to LDAO, non-verbal learning disabilities are best defined in terms of their symptoms, and, regardless of the name, NLD does not affect an individual's language skills. In contrast, NLD can influence:

[U]nderstanding non-verbal communication like facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice; physical coordination; visual spatial organization; social perception and social competency; adaptation to new situations; abilities with mathematics and abstract concepts; and understanding figurative language.

(LDAO, 2011a)

All of these aspects can make learning in a classroom a challenging experience because a student with a NLD will not have as strong an understanding as others of the teacher's non-verbal instruction.

Complexity of Exceptionalities

Interplay between learning disability and hearing loss. Laura has two exceptionalities, a NLD and hearing loss in her right ear. She explained that

[B]oth of these things are likely to have happened from brain damage sustained when I was being born. Because I had an MRI scan done when I was ten or eleven [and it showed] there was some white matter. (January 26; 10–13)

She clarified that white matter “is the stuff that helps the grey matter communicate well with one another, and, since some of that stuff is not there, it kind of makes it harder for me” (January 26; 13–15). Both of these exceptionalities play a critical part in her role within the classroom.

When asked if she felt her learning disability and hearing loss influenced different activities at school and whether she saw them as being separate disabilities, Laura needed to take a moment to reflect on the past to determine how both of her exceptionalities worked in school. She responded,

Well, I think that there are times when I can’t really tell where my hearing impairment affects me and my learning disability affects me; they kind of blend together. But I think mostly in social situations my hearing impairment affects me a lot more. But in academic things my learning disability [pause] is much more apparent. (January 26; 466–470)

She explained that she felt that she did not fit into her peers’ social expectations and that “maybe that, in turn, kept me from interacting [with them] because I didn’t feel confident

and [I] had no skill in social interactions” (January 26; 113–114). Laura believed that the complexity created by these two exceptionalities was evident for her both academically and socially at school. However, when asked whether her experience would have been different if she had only a learning disability, she said that she would still have been a shy person regardless. She also asserted that she did not let her exceptionalities affect who she was as a person.

Managing her learning disability and hearing loss. Loud noises and different academic situations were barriers that Laura had to face in school. However, these circumstances did not stop Laura from participating in school because she knew what she needed to do to compensate for them. A critical tool that she needed to help with her engagement within the classroom was an FM system. She explained that her FM system had two components:

[O]ne is a microphone that the teacher wears [around his or her neck], and the other component is basically like a receiver system I wear. And when the teacher wears it and they speak, the sound that they make gets picked up by the microphone in the FM system, and it gets turned into a radio signal, and my FM receiver picks that up and transmits it to the ear-bud that I wear in my left ear. I don’t know if it magnifies the sound, but it makes it more crisp and clear [and] easier to hear what the teacher is saying. (February 2; 329–336)

Having teachers use an FM system made listening in the classroom much easier for Laura because “I could hear him or her better and it [was] much more effective for me to listen

and concentrate when I had an FM system. The day I got the FM system was pretty great!” (January 26; 290–294).

Moreover, Laura needed an FM system when she was in the classroom because, without it, a lot of concentration and energy was needed to filter out the extraneous background noises to focus on the teacher. By eliminating the “overwhelming” (January 26; 334) noisy environment, the system also allowed her to better compensate for her learning disability because she could focus on the non-verbal information being given in class without being distracted by noises in the background. She explained its effectiveness by saying that using an FM system is similar to having closed captioning when one is watching television, because it allowed for the processing of “visual words to understand what is going on” (January 26; 336). Using an FM system allowed Laura to hear the spoken words and thus connect movement in the classroom with its meaning.

Working with her strengths. Laura was well aware of her strengths as a learner and used them to help compensate for her weaknesses. She said that she enjoyed English and history in school because they were “two things that you read and see, and I find that I express myself better in writing than orally. And English and history I really liked because I am really good at memorizing facts and dates” (January 26; 128–130). Laura expressed how much she enjoyed reading and usually had two or three books on the go at one time. She said, “I’ve always loved books” (January 26; 122). Laura also enjoyed writing even though it was sometimes difficult for her because the physical act of writing, took longer for her than for her peers. She was very clear that she could write but that “it

just takes me a lot longer ‘cause my brain has to process the motor skills [for writing]” (January 26; 126–127). Hence, the use of a computer for subjects like English and history was helpful for notes and the organization of her writing.

Through her knowledge of what she enjoyed and was good at in school, she was able to use these skills to help with her weaker subject areas. She communicated that her least favorite subject was math: “it’s the bane of my existence” (January 26; 146). When asked why she did not like math, she explained that she passed her math courses with fairly good grades but that “it didn’t really come as easily to me as things like reading or writing or subjects like history and English” (January 26; 150–151). She said that the reason she passed math was because her father was really good at math and helped her to change math into a language. This allowed Laura to understand the concepts better because they were in a format that was suited to her strengths. She explained that her father “would spend hours tutoring me, trying to help me find ways to make math into a language, ‘cause I am really good at languages and I could memorize and understand” (January 26; 153–154). She provided an example of how her father turned algebra into a language for her by telling her, ““These are the steps you have to follow to solve algebraic equations: (1) define your variables, (2) write out the equation, (3) show your work...and solve it”” (January 26; 155–157). This type of instruction made math easier for Laura because it told her what she needed to do to complete the equation. She suggested that teachers should try to use this method in their teachings to help students who have a NLD.

Social Challenges

Being introverted. Laura described herself as an introvert. She claimed that she spent most of her time, in elementary and even more so in secondary school, in the library. Being in different social situations was not a comfortable feeling for her. She explained, “I was and never have been comfortable with doing all the things that allow you to bond with your classmates like going to loud parties and being a part of group conversations” (January 26; 36–38) and “I get overwhelmed and can’t really concentrate in a larger group setting” (January 26; 23–24). These types of situations also existed within the classroom for Laura when she was expected to be part of a group presentation. Laura explained that this type of situation was difficult for her because “I have trouble organizing my thoughts when speaking; and when I get nervous, like, to present stuff to people, it gets worse, and I stutter and tend to repeat myself” (January 26; 263–265). Furthermore, Laura commented that because she was shy, people in the group would often talk over her and interrupt if she was trying to speak. These actions made Laura feel distressed because she could not express what she knew to her group members, and this contributed to her not participating in many large group discussions because she felt self-conscious and uncomfortable.

Friendship. It appeared that friendship was an uncomfortable topic for Laura to discuss; having difficulties in social situations made it hard for her to make friends in school. She acknowledged that she had very few friends: “I can count them on one hand, possibly both if you count acquaintances” (January 26; 21–22) because, especially in

secondary school, she spent a lot of her time in the library and the resource room rather than interacting with her peers. Laura got along better with people who were either younger or older than with peers her own age. When asked why she preferred playing with kids who were younger than her in elementary school, she explained that people in her own age group either “ignored me or teased me, i.e. bullying” (January 26; 95), whereas the children in lower grades never questioned who she was but just accepted her. As well, she spoke of how much fun it was playing with the younger kids because they went off to a secluded area of the playground and had pretend adventures and played games. While she was playing with these kids, she did not have to worry about getting teased like she did when she was amongst her own peers. The pretend adventures ended once she went to secondary school, where she was often left on her own.

While discussing the issues of social acceptance and friendship, it was evident that Laura was confused as to why her peers of the same age did not accept her like the younger kids in elementary did. Laura expressed, “It’s hard to tell whether the teasing was because of my learning disability or because of how shy and introverted I was” (January 26; 108–109). She went on to say, “I don’t know if [having few friends was because of an] interplay between my hearing loss and my learning disability or like, both; I don’t know” (January 26; 24–26). Looking back on these experiences, Laura thought that her own lack of understanding of who she was and why these difficulties were happening may have contributed to her peers’ lack of understanding and teasing. Not understanding why her peers were being mean and excluding her in elementary and

secondary school “carried over into my adult life” (January 26; 181) because Laura is cautious of who she becomes friends with now. She sometimes questions when people are nice to her and want to be her friend she asks herself, “Why do you want to be my friend? Most people don’t; why do you?” (January 26; 182–183) and “Why are you being nice to me?” (February 2; 149). Laura clarified in her follow-up interview that she does not do this in all situations but that there are times when a little flag goes up in her mind to think back to what happened to her in school.

Wanting help. Not participating or being included in social activities can be a difficult thing to experience in school, particularly when one’s learning disability contributes to this marginalization. She wished that her teachers could have helped her with “support in learning how to get along socially and keeping me from being emotionally bullied by others in my class” (January 26; 372–373). She realized that this would be a difficult task for teachers but noted that, nonetheless, it would have been extremely helpful for her in school. Laura further commented that it is not impossible because she remembered two of her teachers helping her in school. Mrs. Edwards and Mrs. Foster assisted Laura with more than her academics; they also helped her with understanding social situations as well. Laura commented on how Mrs. Edwards, who was a resource consultant at Laura’s elementary school and also advised her during her first year of secondary school, talked her through social situations and gave her advice about what to do the next time. Additionally, Mrs. Foster, the resource teacher in secondary school, sometimes invited Laura to have a cup of tea with her in the resource

room so they could simply talk. Laura described these experiences as “pretty great” (January 26; 210) and confidence-building. Laura’s comments remind us that teaching goes beyond the classroom. When teachers make an effort to help their students outside of the classroom that can mean a world of difference for a student who may be struggling socially.

Summary

Laura’s NLD and hearing loss contributed to more challenges for her within the social realm of her education. She articulated that she found ways to help her inside the classroom through using an FM system and working with her strengths, but she wanted more help from her teachers to succeed socially. Her struggles with being in large social group situations made it difficult for her to bond with peers and develop friendships. Laura’s experiences have demonstrated that a learning disability not only exists in a classroom but also is a part of life that she has to contend with everyday.

Shane

Description of Shane

Shane was the third participant in this study, and, like Laura, he also was shy but interested in participating in the study in order to educate others about his experiences with a learning disability. His soft-spoken nature added a pleasant quality to his interview. However, because of a busy schedule, Shane was unable to do a follow-up interview; therefore, the data reported in the subsequent pages comes from his single interview. When asked what type of learning disability he had, he responded that he

struggled with “reading, writing, and spelling and math” (January 27; 26) but did not identify a SLD during the course of the interview. He was diagnosed with a learning disability when he “was in senior kindergarten or Grade 1” (January 27; 59), unlike Zack and Laura whose learning disability was not identified until later in elementary school. Shane did not mention any comorbidity with his learning disability. The social aspect of having a learning disability was not a primary concern for Shane. He explained that he made friends easily and that his learning disability caused him no social distress. In fact, his friends were supportive of him and offered words of encouragement when Shane would have moments of struggles due to his learning disability.

Difference Between Elementary and Secondary School

Transition from elementary to secondary school. Shane identified a distinguishable difference between elementary and secondary school. In fact, many of his responses about his experiences in elementary and secondary school were in marked contrast to one another. Shane expressed that “I didn’t really enjoy elementary school, I enjoyed secondary school” (January 17; 31). He attributed this contrast to the way that teachers treated him because their awareness of LD was completely different in secondary school than it was in elementary. Even his desire to go to school every morning was different in secondary school; for him, being in a secondary school classroom was not daunting because he was more comfortable than he was in elementary. Whereas, in elementary school, Shane often asked himself, “Oh, I have to go to school

again?” (January 27; 220). He found being at school, later in his educational career, “almost relaxing in a way” (January 27; 214), unlike when he was in elementary.

When asked what aspect of secondary school allowed him to enjoy his education more, Shane responded that, in elementary school, he did not enjoy the subjects that were taught because most of them focused on areas that were a struggle because of his learning disability. As a result, he had great difficulty grasping the material, and “it wasn’t clicking” (January 27; 124). In secondary school, in contrast, he enjoyed being able to select what courses he wanted to take rather than being forced to take classes that were not interesting to him. As well, he explained that, in secondary school, there were fewer classes that he had to take, which meant, “I had less to worry about” (January 27; 38). Because his anxiety was lower for all of the aforementioned reasons, Shane was able to focus more within the classroom.

Difference in teachers. When I asked probing questions about why Shane found secondary school more enjoyable than elementary, he explained that the difference mostly stemmed from the teachers. Speaking of his elementary school teachers, he said,

[T]hey didn’t really understand what a learning disability really was. So I guess they really just thought that I wasn’t the brightest student ‘cause I was always told that, like, I wouldn’t succeed...I wouldn’t do well in high school, as well, like [not] go on to post-secondary or anything like that. (January 27; 74–78)

He explained that teachers in elementary school just thought that he was “not applying” (January 27; 333) himself and that the teachers “weren’t as supportive” (January 27; 148)

as they later were in secondary school. Furthermore, they did not give him what he needed in the classroom; even with his early identification, Shane's elementary teachers "didn't know how to teach differently; as well, they weren't as lenient on giving extra time 'cause other students weren't getting that or letting me write in different space 'cause it was unfair" (January 27; 65–67) to the other students. Shane believed that it was the responsibility of the teacher to adhere to the accommodations that he needed.

In secondary school, Shane had a totally difference experience dealing with teachers. He commented that his teachers in secondary school better understood what LD were and provided him with what he needed to feel comfortable in the classroom. He explained,

[I]n high school they [the teachers] definitely were one hundred percent behind me [because] they knew I had a learning disability, so it was their focus to accommodate me the best they could so I could learn just as well as any other student. (January 27; 78–81)

This understanding and knowledge helped to make secondary school more comfortable for Shane. He commented that "going into high school I got a lot of help [from teachers]" (January 27; 37); for example, they allowed him to go for walks, use a laptop, and have extra time on tests and assignments, which made all the difference to Shane's success in school.

Challenges of Having a Learning Disability

Struggles through school. Shane explained that many of his academic struggles occurred in elementary school. He spoke about how in elementary school

I didn't understand a lot of things at the time, so I struggled a lot and failed a few classes. I never got held back, but I—just from, like, report cards—I was always just under fifty, most of the time. (January 27; 48–50)

Moreover, he claimed that he had a bad memory and that it also influenced his struggles within school.

When asked about academic subjects, Shane again mentioned that the areas he struggled with in school were reading, writing, spelling, and math. Not having the support of teachers in elementary caused him to struggle even more when completing daily assignments because he was not getting the support he needed to accommodate his weaknesses. As well, he claimed that his bad memory made subjects like history and geography difficult for him; however, he did comment on how he did well in a history course that was required in secondary school but it was still a struggle for him. He didn't provide details, but more knowledgeable teachers contributed to his successful completion of a subject he previously considered himself as being unable to complete. Shane also described how he did not enjoy when he would have to participate in some classroom activities. One activity that Shane specifically remembers as difficult and embarrassing was being called upon to read aloud in class. He described this experience as

[D]efinitely the most horrifying thing! So it wasn't good 'cause, of course, everyone knew I was a few [levels] below [in] reading than everyone else in my class. So they would just, like, read all right through, and, then, as soon as it comes to me, it's just—I would struggle... When I was younger it felt like everyone is going to think that I am not as smart as them 'cause I can't read this as fluently as everyone else could. (January 27; 197–203)

After these types of activities, Shane often believed that he could not succeed like his peers in school.

Summary

Shane's experiences highlight how a teacher's understanding of LD can influence a student's relationship to the classroom, which can strongly affect his or her desire to attend school. The discrepancy in knowledge of LD between Shane's elementary and secondary school teachers was a major influence on Shane's perceptions of school. His more negative experiences in elementary of not getting the support he needed from his teachers to help him understand the material like his peers made Shane uncomfortable, and he did not enjoy the academic aspect of school. But, in secondary school, where the teachers knew what LD meant and gave him the accommodations he needed, he enjoyed school much more and did not find himself struggling to understand the material as much as he had done in elementary.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reported the individual findings for three YALD describing their unique experiences with their exceptionalities in elementary and secondary school. The three participants had a total of seven distinct themes amongst each other and three general themes in common. The next chapter reports the commonalities of themes amongst the participants' experiences to highlight similar thoughts and ideas reported by Zack, Laura, and Shane.

Chapter 5

Cross-Case Analysis

This chapter explores the common experiences and thoughts of academic and social aspects of school that Zack, Laura, and Shane discussed. The three main themes that emerged from the data and that will be discussed subsequently include: understanding a learning disability, the interaction between a learning disability and the classroom space, and Zack's, Laura's, and Shane's reflections for teachers. The examination of these themes revealed that, in spite of the heterogeneity and complexities of their learning disabilities, Zack, Laura, and Shane shared a number of academic and social experiences that point to more widespread changes that need to be made to better accommodate students with LD. See Table 2 for participants' cross-case theme analysis.

Understanding a Learning Disability

The Meaning of Having a Learning Disability

One of the first interview questions that the participants were asked was how they each understood their LD and what it meant to them. Zack, Laura, and Shane had a common response. Zack described his learning disability by explaining that he can “learn as much as other people do, just in a different way. Therefore, I am not disabled in learning in any way” (Zack, November 17; 14–15); rather, “it’s a learning difference” (Zack, November 17; 8). Laura described how her non-verbal “learning disability means that I express myself better with the written word rather than oral means because my

Table 2

Themes from Cross-Case Analysis of Three Participants

<p>1) Understanding a Learning Disability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) The Meaning of Having a Learning Disabilityb) Accommodating a Learning Disability<ul style="list-style-type: none">i) Getting What They Needed to be Successful In Their Learning<ul style="list-style-type: none">1.1) Accommodations Specific to The Exceptionality1.2) Taking Walks to Concentrate1.3) Having The Gift of Time1.4) Moving Towards The Front of The Classroom1.5) The Use of a Note-Takerii) Accommodations are Not Always Constructiveiii) Lack of Accommodations Received In Elementary Schoolc) Breaking The Silence<ul style="list-style-type: none">i) Parental Involvementii) Self-Advocating <p>2) The Interaction Between a Learning Disability and The Classroom Space</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) Having a Safe Spaceb) Different Classroom Structures <p>3) Zack's, Laura's, and Shane's Reflections for Teachers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) Teachers' Supportb) Suggestions to Help Teachers Work With Students With LD<ul style="list-style-type: none">i) Getting to Know Your Students<ul style="list-style-type: none">3.1) Impact of Teachers' Lack of Understandingc) Looking Out for The Quiet Ones

brain takes longer to process stuff” (Laura, January 26; 15–17). As well, Shane did not hesitate to explain his learning disability when others questioned him about it; he commented that “it doesn’t bother me that I have a learning disability ‘cause, I just, I learn differently than other people. It’s no big deal with me” (Shane, January 27; 21–22). These individuals did not view having a learning disability as an inhibitor for learning but rather as an ability to process information differently from their peers. Even though they all expressed that their LD did cause some difficulties in school at times, they all emphasized that, now, they do not let their LD define them or limit their abilities.

Accommodating a Learning Disability

Getting what they needed to be successful in their learning. Because Zack, Laura, and Shane each learn in a different way from their peers, they needed to have accommodations put in place in school to help with their learning and to allow them to feel included within the classroom. For students with LD, the use of accommodations can assist in the learning that happens in a classroom. Shane commented that accommodations permitted him to understand the material better and, therefore, earn better marks on tests and assignments. Interestingly, Zack’s, Laura’s, and Shane’s responses all suggested that some of the accommodations did not require a great deal of additional effort from their teachers, yet these small activities had a major benefit when used.

Accommodations specific to the exceptionality. As discussed in the preceding chapter, each participant had different types of exceptionalities and required some accommodations specific to himself or herself. Zack and Laura provided specific examples of accommodations that they needed that were unique to each of them. Zack needed accommodations that gave him an outlet for his hyperactivity, a goal that was realized through the use of fidget toys, such as stress balls. Zack said that, when his teachers understood this need and allowed him to have fidget toys, it was “a big thing” (Zack, November 17; 296) for him because he was able to channel his excess energy into the toys. Without them, his excessive energy sometimes distracted the rest of the class, but, with the toys, Zack was able to remain focused in the classroom.

Likewise, as previously mentioned, Laura required the use of an FM system to help her alleviate extraneous background noises in the classroom so that she could focus on the teacher. Before the use of an FM system, Laura used a hearing aid, which did not allow her to concentrate on the verbal instructions of the teacher. Therefore, the additional accommodation of an FM system allowed Laura to be included within her classrooms in school. These examples of specific accommodations gave further support for Zack and Laura in addition to the four more general accommodations that will be discussed below.

Taking walks to concentrate. Zack and Shane spoke of how they enjoyed being allowed to go for five-minute walks when they were in class. They explained that, when they became distracted, their teachers allowed them to leave the classroom for a quick

walk around the school; this small amount of physical activity allowed them to get a break and refocus so that they could concentrate on putting their energy back into the lesson being taught. Shane commented on how he enjoyed being able to “go and leave and come back” (Shane, January 27; 45) when he needed. Furthermore, Zack found this arrangement of short walks a relief. He explained that, unlike his peers, who did not have this accommodation, he did not have to use the bathroom as an excuse to leave. Instead, he could ask for one of his walks if he needed it, and the teachers did not question him.

Having the gift of time. All of the participants commented on how they appreciated being allowed extra time for tests and assignments. The additional time allowed them to process the task they were required to do and understand how to complete it. As well, it permitted them to think about what information they wanted and needed to use and to organize their thoughts without worrying about how much time they had left. They explained that, when they required extra time, they were often sent to the resource room, where it was quiet. Furthermore, the use of a computer in the resource room helped Zack, Laura, and Shane to complete their tasks more easily because the physical movement of writing was sometimes difficult for them, and it took less time to write out notes and assignments via computer than by hand.

Moving towards the front of the classroom. Sitting at the front of the classroom allowed the participants to focus on classroom instruction rather than being distracted by their peers when sitting elsewhere. In particular, Zack provided a great deal of detail about the importance of seating arrangements within the classroom. He explained that his

need to be seated at the front was not revealed to the rest of the class because the teacher assigned him that seat so that Zack “always knew I had a front seat” (Zack, November 17; 751). Zack appreciated when the teacher took the initiative to sit him at the front of the class because it alleviated his need to ask to be seated away from his friends. A further benefit of being at the front of the classroom was that it allowed him to be close to the teacher so that “I didn’t have to put my hand up if I had a question. I could just ask her right there” (Zack, November 17; 731). Laura explained that, even with her teachers wearing an FM system, sitting up at the front of the class allowed her to “be closer to the teacher and hear them even more effectively” (Laura, February 2; 278–279). Zack and Laura knew that from the beginning of school they needed to have a seat in the front for the entire year to help them focus on classroom instruction.

The use of a note-taker. Having access to either the teacher’s or a friend’s class notes was a common accommodation that all three participants believed would have been beneficial for them during elementary and secondary. They explained that it was often a challenge for them to listen and take notes at the same time. Their focus would be directed to either writing down what was said but not being able to put the material into context or listening to the teacher and not taking notes. Looking back on their experiences, Zack, Laura, and Shane all declared that having a note-taker in school would have been useful. Then they would not have had to worry about writing notes for later use and could have concentrated on the lesson and received the notes from one of their peers afterwards.

However, having a note-taker in elementary or secondary school was not always an option for the participants. Shane was the exception when he discussed that he would “often get other students’ notes” (Shane, January 27; 268) in secondary school. But Zack and Laura did not know that this accommodation was available. Yet they wished they had one when they were in school. Zack commented that

I’d never got a note-taker in high school. I never got my notes printed [from the teacher]; that would have been nice ‘cause, again, I can’t take notes and listen [at the same time]. So I barely [took] any notes, or, if I did, I don’t know what the teacher said. For me, it’s useless to have a piece of paper that says all this that I have written down; [without context] it’s useless. (Zack, November 17; 460–464)

As well, Laura spoke about how she did not have a note-taker in secondary school. She could sometimes write her own notes, but it often took her longer than her peers. Zack and Laura said that having access to either a student’s notes or a copy of the teacher’s notes would have been beneficial to their learning in school.

Accommodations are not always constructive. The participants’ discussion also revealed that accommodations were not always enough to help with their learning. Laura explained that the accommodation of receiving extra time for tests and assignments was helpful but that it was equally important that the teacher also checked to ensure that the student comprehended the material and the task he or she was supposed to complete. She pointed out that “teachers should not assume that giving extra time is the answer to all

disabilities issues” (Laura, January 26; 444); she said that it would have been more beneficial to have someone teach her how to organize her thoughts by using a computer and different adaptive technology programs like Inspiration. She further explained that she was told that she did not need to use a computer to write out her answers because she had extra time, but, “when you are having problems, it’s kind of hard when you take a lot of time writing out your answers...[even] when you get double time” (Laura, January 26; 448–450). Ensuring that the students have all of the tools they need to complete a task is important; teachers should not just assume that because they have extra time, they do not need anything else.

Zack further elaborated that the use of computers to complete tests and assignments was useful for eliminating the distress that writing by hand creates among those who struggle with the physical dexterity required by writing. However, just having a computer was not always a solution. For instance, Zack passed the Literacy Test with the use of a computer, but he explained that the computer did not have “spelling or grammar on it” (Zack, January 17; 477). Therefore, it helped him to write the test more easily than writing it by hand, but it did not help him with the areas that his learning disability affects most strongly. Shane also said that his school did not provide the option of digitizing his textbooks and novels through a reading program such as Kurzweil.

Zack further explained how, when he was in the upper grades in elementary school, he was able to complete a couple of tests orally. However, this accommodation was not done at a different time or in a different classroom away from his peers. He

explained that, “I got to do oral exams with the teacher at the front desk while the class was doing their test right in front of me...So I never got to go out of the room. There’s a negative experience” (Zack, November 17; 643–644 & 650). Even though he was receiving the accommodation needed for his learning disability, it was not understood how to properly use the accommodation so that it could fully benefit Zack. Therefore, the use of accommodations does provide benefits for students, but teachers must be aware of the potential drawbacks of the accommodations as well.

Lack of accommodations received in elementary school. All three participants mentioned that they did not really get any accommodations in elementary school; in fact, it was not until they reached secondary school that they were given some of the aforementioned accommodations. Zack provided a general description of the situation he encountered in elementary school: “there wasn’t much done [to help me], though...I just feel like the teachers I had [in elementary school] really had a lacking [*sic*] of understanding” (Zack, November 17; 301–302) about learning disabilities and the importance of getting accommodations. More specifically Laura said during her interview, “In elementary school I did not have the use of a computer...I never got to use a computer” (Laura, January 26; 319–320), Shane noted a similar experience when he stated that “I don’t recall them [teachers] giving me any extra time or anything like that” (Shane, January 27; 317). Shane tried to rationalize the reasoning behind the lack of accommodations in elementary school, and he commented that he thought it was because

[T]he periods were so short...there wasn't really any [time]; I didn't get to write anywhere else most of the time. So it was like, as soon as the forty minutes were up, we were starting something else basically. (Shane, January 27; 317–319)

Because of the daily schedule of elementary school, Shane said that his teachers were unable to use time as an accommodation because then Shane would fall behind when the rest of class would move on and he was still doing a task from the previous subject block. Regardless of the reason for the absence of adequate accommodations, all three participants believed that their elementary school teachers needed to have a better sense of the need for accommodations for students with LD.

Breaking The Silence

Parental Involvement. Zack, Laura, and Shane experienced varying levels of parental involvement in their educational careers. There was discrepancy amongst the participants' descriptions of their parents' involvement in school. Zack and Laura reported the most about how their parents tried to be involved with their academic and social challenges at school. They reported that their parents tried helping them by getting them tutors, sending them to special programs, and encouraging them to self-advocate in school. However, Shane did not report on his parents' involvement with helping his learning disability. Shane stated that his parents did not really talk to his teachers except during parent-teacher night. He did not mention other experiences of his parents advocating for him and he did not have to do much advocating as his teachers in secondary school gave him the accommodations he needed. Zack and Laura's parents

sought to strike a balance between advocating for their children when they were in elementary school and teaching them the importance of advocating for themselves. Through their self-advocacy for getting what was needed for their learning, these two took more initiative in secondary school to communicate with their teachers about their LD and the accommodations they needed.

Having to go to their teachers and tell them about their LD was sometimes a distressing task, but Zack, Laura, and Shane realized that they could not depend on others to always advocate for them. Laura commented how, in elementary school, she did not say much to get any accommodation, but, once she got into secondary school, “I knew what my disability was [and] I’d be, like, ‘Okay, this is what I need: I need to sit in the front, you [the teacher] need[s] to have an FM system’” (Laura, February 2; 285–286). Zack described how difficult it was to self-advocate because “it’s so nerve wracking...but, at the same time, once you get used to it, it takes you so much farther than you think” (Zack, November 17; 767–769).

Self-advocating. Recognizing the importance of advocating in school, all of the participants commented on how they should have “spoken out more” (Shane, January 27; 341). The development of greater self-confidence to communicate more with teachers was a theme that emerged from all of the participants. In addition, Zack’s account highlighted the importance of a clear understanding of LD among both students and teachers. Zack described his efforts to advocate for himself in secondary school, which entailed having “to tell the teachers, like, what I have and stuff, ‘cause they didn’t

understand [learning disabilities or ADHD]. So I would have to explain it to them which I did an awful job ‘cause I didn’t even know what I had” (Zack, January 17; 472–474). These obstacles sometimes left him not wanting to advocate because he struggled with understanding what he needed at the time and could not effectively explain it to his teachers. Moreover, because Zack’s teachers often lacked a general understanding of different LD, they were unable to fully comprehend the nature of Zack’s difficulties and the accommodations he required. Zack, Laura, and Shane said that these gaps in communication could have been lessened and that they would have had better experiences in elementary school if they had “tried to communicate more” (Laura, February 2; 419) with their teachers to help educate them about their LD and their needs in the classroom.

The Interaction Between A Learning Disability And The Classroom Space Having A Safe Space

Being in a classroom may be a stressful experience for students with LD because the classroom environment is not always suitable to the students’ learning. Having a safe place to go when their regular classroom environment did not allow Zack, Laura, and Shane to concentrate was important to them, and they all spoke of their access to the school resource room in secondary school. The participants described the resource room as a space they could go to “write a test or finish an assignment” (Shane, January 27; 232–233). Laura explained that “certain classrooms...were really noisy, and, I didn’t like it and I would feel uncomfortable. And I’d, like, I can’t really concentrate in such a noisy

environment” (Laura, January 26; 284–286). Going to a less noisy environment with fewer people in the room provided a sense of security for the participants because they knew what to expect when they went to the resource room and could “concentrate on...work and feel much more confident” (Laura, January 26; 300). Zack commented that being in the resource room made him feel

[L]ess anxious because I knew where I was going. And I knew none of my friends or the people who teased me ever go in there because, for one, they don’t get [access to] it; two, they would never use it. So I knew they weren’t there.

[Laughs] (Zack, November 17; 590–593)

The sense of uncertainty surrounding academics and social issues was gone for the participants when they were in the resource room, because they knew they had the support they needed while they were there.

The feeling of being inside the resource room was different than being in the regular classroom for the participants. Zack provided a metaphor (Burden & Burdett, 2007) of the feeling that he had going to his resource room; he described it as

[Y]ou know when, like, you just feel like you have had a really stressful week or something, and you just feel like your shoulders are up to here [raising his shoulders up to his ears]. And then you, you just go home or go in the hot tub or something relaxing, and you just [loudly exhales]. That’s what it was [like going to the resource room]! (Zack, November 17; 597–600)

It was a room where the participants found they could relax and work better because they were in a room with a small number of students who understood each other and why they were there. They did not have the feeling of being different when they were in the resource room; in contrast, they felt more included and accepted. When asked about how many people were usually in the resource room, it was explained that it varied from period-to-period and day-to-day, but they all said that the number was normally under ten students, which allowed them to get more one-on-one instruction from their resource teacher. Being amongst peers with similar learning exceptionalities and not fighting to get attention from the teacher helped Zack, Laura, and Shane to reduce their feeling of self-consciousness when they were in the resource room.

The participants explained that with fewer students in the resource room, they also had more workspace than when they were in their regular classroom. Zack previously mentioned that when he was in his regular classrooms, he often felt “confined” (Zack, November 17; 560), but, in the resource room, there was “more space around me [and] I wasn’t sitting right beside someone. So I could have my stuff kind of spread out...it was more free in the resource room” (Zack, November 17; 700–703). Laura described the set-up of her resource room in secondary school as having “three offices in the back for people to take tests in...there were computers along the side wall and big desks in the middle of the room and study carrels on the walls” (Laura, February 2; 300–303). The participants further described that the resource room was not structured like a regular classroom; it had a different environment, which I will describe in more

detail in the next section, making it more comfortable for the participants to complete their work and receive more one-on-one instruction from the resource teacher.

Different Classroom Structures

When asked what the resource room was like in their elementary schools, all of the participants stated that their elementary schools had no resource room. Shane explained that, when he was in elementary school, he and a couple of other students in the class would get pulled-out of the classroom for a few days a week to work with a counsellor on reading skills, but that these sessions occurred in a small office rather than a dedicated resource room. Zack and Laura did not state whether these types of sessions were available at their own elementary schools.

Comparing the physical set-up of their regular classrooms and their resource rooms, Zack and Laura reflected on the aspects they enjoyed and the ones they did not. Zack gave the example of how his Grade 8 classroom was in the tech room, and he said,

[I]t was interesting because there was a bunch of stuff I could get distracted with and I am just like, ‘Oh, look at that blade; [it] is really sharp.’ And I would try to count how many points it has on it. So that was not good. (Zack, November 17; 424–426)

This potential for distraction also existed in more conventional classrooms. Although Zack enjoyed when teachers would put posters around the room because they added colour to white walls and helped to make the classroom not feel like a “prison” (Zack, November 17; 432), he realized that too many posters became distracting. For Laura,

posters in the classroom were a visual aid to help with her hearing loss. Zack's and Laura's disparate experiences highlight the importance for teachers of finding a balance between making their classroom look appealing and inviting but not overwhelming students with LD with colours and information.

Although they were uncertain of specific strategies that might be used to make the regular classroom more like the comfort of the resource room, it was important to the participants to find a way to bridge the gap between the two spaces. When asked about the positive aspects of resource rooms, Zack spoke of how his resource teacher would allow the students to listen to their mp3's or iPod's when they were working, as long as the music was quiet enough that it did not distract others and still allowed work to be completed. Zack also suggested that a "token economy" (Zack, January 17; 451) would also be a useful addition to the classroom environment. Shane experienced this type of arrangement in his secondary resource room; he explained that, if students finished their work, they could "go on the computer and play games" (Shane, January 27; 241–242). This agreement was used as an incentive for getting their work done.

Zack and Laura also went beyond describing the physical environment of the resource room to consider how the social environment made the space more comfortable. The attitude of teachers in the resource room was more supportive than that of most of the participants' regular classroom teachers. Offering support with things other than academics was a quality that the participants admired in their teachers. Helping with social situations like "keeping [me] from being emotionally bullied" (Laura, January 26;

372), or being “someone you could stop in the hallway...and no matter how busy he was, he would talk to you for at least five minutes about any question you had” (Zack, November 17; 497–499), were qualities that were wanted in teachers to help change the regular classroom into a more comfortable environment.

Zack’s, Laura’s, and Shane’s Reflections for Teachers

Teachers are an important part of the classroom and play an important role in making the classroom a safe and engaging environment for students with LD. When the participants received the support of a classroom teacher, they said that they experienced more positive experiences because they were working with a teacher who understood what their exceptionality meant. This section reports the participants’ reflections and suggestions for teachers to help enhance their understanding of how to work with students with LD.

Teachers’ Support

Having the support of their teacher in school was a recurring theme amongst the participants. They realized that they received the most support from the teachers who understood LD and knew what the participants needed within the classroom. A positive experience they all outlined was when they had teachers who knew about the concept of a learning disability because they were aware of what it meant for them as students and the teachers accepted their accommodations without hesitation. Shane explained that he had more support in secondary school, not understanding why there was a difference in teachers’ knowledge and understanding of LD from elementary to secondary. He

commented that his secondary school teachers were “really supportive, they understood [and] they would do what they could to help you” (Shane, January 27; 68–69).

Zack explained that he enjoyed when teachers would take a little extra interest in him when they noticed he was not himself. As previously mentioned, Zack would normally sit at the front of the class, but when he had a bad day, he moved himself towards the back of the classroom. He commented that some of his teachers would notice that “I was upset [and] something wasn’t right, and I didn’t want to be up there [at the front]” (Zack, November 17; 115–116), but they would “take me aside and question me, and I hate it [on one hand], but inside I was like, thank you! I want someone to notice, and that was good” (Zack, November 17; 117–118). Helping the participants through “not only academic things but also with socially [*sic*]” (Laura, January 26; 252–253) had lasting impressions on them as they progressed through school. The participants experienced these situations more in secondary school from some of their regular classroom teachers, but mostly from their resource room teachers.

Suggestions to Help Teachers Work With Students With LD

The commonalities among participants’ individual encounters with teachers highlighted strategies for improving teachers’ pedagogy for working with students with LD. Zack, Laura, and Shane reflected on their elementary and secondary schooling and spoke about enhancements that could have been made for them and for other students with LD.

Getting to know your students. A large component of the participants' discussion was ways in which teachers could improve their knowledge and understanding of LD. The participants expressed that it was frustrating for them having to work with teachers who did not understand about LD. Moreover, they commented that a lot of teachers do not get enough training during their professional development to fully understand LD and how to work with students who have a learning disability.

Zack and Shane spoke about the importance of teachers getting to know their students by talking with them to help understand them better because students “know themselves better than you [the teacher] do[es]” (Shane, January 27; 365–366). Zack commented that teachers needed to do their own research on different exceptionalities that they had not taught before so that they could familiarize themselves. During his explaining, however, he realized that there was another way to learn about diverse exceptionalities. He stated that teachers needed to

[R]esearch if your student has a new disability that you are not a hundred percent comfortable with. Research it! Get to know it! Because there is [*sic*] so many things that you don't...or—even—don't research it; talk to the student. That's what I feel is the biggest thing! You can learn so much from a student because, no matter how much you...research a diagnosis or a disorder, you won't learn more than talking to that child. Because that's the diagnosis for that child; you'll get a lot of stuff [when you talk to him or her] that you won't see [in the research. Talking] with this child you'll get what exactly you need to know. Like, five

minutes after class or before class [the teacher] can be, like, you know, ‘Let’s just talk,’ you know, relaxed [conversation]. (Zack, November 17; 960–969)

Making the attempt to talk to the students themselves and asking them what they needed in the classroom provided the teacher with an opportunity to learn about different exceptionalities. But only relying on a definitional understanding of an exceptionality would not provide much assistance for the teacher because a learning disability is “different for everybody” (Zack, November 17; 313). Zack, Laura, and Shane all articulated that through talking with students, teachers could enhance their understanding of working with students with LD.

Impact of teachers’ lack of understanding. When teachers did not get to know their students they would not understand their students’ exceptionalities. The participants explained that sometimes their educators misunderstood or even failed to acknowledge the existence of LD. Shane discussed the lack of understanding of his teachers while in elementary school. Zack provided an example of what he experienced in elementary school because of teachers’ lack of understanding of LD. A particular experience that Zack remembered was how his Grade 8 teacher, Mr. Davis, did not think that Zack had a learning disability because “my hygiene was good, I had friends, and I was pleasant in class, and that was his definition of a learning disability. So he refused to believe I had one, so he wouldn’t make accommodations for me” (Zack, November 17; 57–59). Zack explained that this was Mr. Davis’s understanding of a learning disability. This was an extreme case of misunderstanding, but the lack of knowledge did exist and contributed to

a difficult year for Zack because of the teacher's "lack of motivation to learn" (Zack, November 17; 277–278) through talking with Zack about his learning disability.

This teacher's denial of Zack's learning disability had a significant impact on Zack's progression from elementary to secondary school, particularly because Mr. Davis refused to pass Zack, a decision that jeopardized his elementary school graduation. But Zack's father demanded that Mr. Davis pass Zack, which he did not do until just before the graduation ceremony. Zack was able to graduate with his peers. Laura said that there was often a focus on reading-related LD and that students with math related LD were sometimes overlooked, but "they need just as much help" (Laura, January 26; 451). Laura commented that teachers sometimes thought that, because students could "read and write well" (Laura, January 26; 452), they did not have difficulty in understanding spatial math problems. However, when teachers did not understand the disconnect between being able to read and write from being able to comprehend spatial concepts in math, students with math related learning disabilities continued to struggle. Therefore, the importance of teachers getting to know their students can reduce teachers' misconceptions about LD and help to create a more positive learning environment.

Looking out for the quiet ones. Laura spoke of how often it was only the loud, disruptive students who received the attention of the teacher in class. She expressed concern that, although quiet students are "not causing you trouble and might not be as loud and vocal as some of the other kids, they may be the ones who most need your support, help, and encouragement" (Laura, January 26; 441–443). Laura articulated that

sometimes in the classroom she might have been overlooked and did not receive extra attention because she was quieter than others in her class and that her attempt at seeking help might not have been as obvious as the louder students but was still needed. Laura believed that ensuring that all students within the classroom get recognition from the teacher was important for developing a more inclusive classroom environment. Even though Laura was the only participant who explicitly discussed this notion, Shane implicitly explained that because he did not speak a lot in class, he sometimes felt ignored by the teachers while he or she was dealing with the rest of class. However, when Shane's teachers were attentive to him, he felt more included within the classroom and it was a better experience for him.

Summary

Zack, Laura, and Shane had some similar thoughts and feelings regarding their educational experiences in elementary and secondary school associated with LD. They repeatedly emphasized through their experiences that, although their learning disability entailed a process of learning differently from that of their peers, they are not "disabled in learning" (Zack, November 17; 15).

Their recognition of their own strengths and weaknesses as learners helped them to further understand their learning disability and aided them in advocating for accommodations from teachers. Additional time, sitting near the front of the classroom, and being allowed to take five-minute walk breaks were some of the main accommodations the participants spoke of needing when they were in school to help with

their learning. At the same time, the participants drew attention to the need for teachers' support in learning and the fact that the use of accommodations did not always help when material was not understood. The participants believed that teachers should not assume that, because students have accommodations, they do not need additional instruction for completing a task. The participants emphasized that the material must first be understood before accommodations can provide the desired benefits.

An overarching theme of Zack's, Laura's, and Shane's interviews was the need to enrich teachers' knowledge and understanding of LD in order to improve students' experiences within the classroom. The three participants recommended that teachers familiarize themselves with different LD by talking with their students. This conversation would allow for teachers to engage in an interactive process that would provide deeper meaning and understanding of LD, which could be used to help enhance teachers teaching style.

Chapter 6

Discussion

This study uncovered the academic and social experiences of three YALD when they were in elementary and secondary school. I begin this final chapter by reintroducing and answering the research questions that guided this study, using the findings from the interviews. I conclude with implications for practice and recommendations for further research.

Zack, Laura, and Shane discussed numerous situations they experienced during their time in elementary and secondary school. The role of the teacher, classroom, and student in these experiences revealed the complexity, but also the importance of understanding their meaning and their influence in shaping the perceptions of the participants. Zack's, Laura's, and Shane's discussions supported the notion suggested by Nind et al. (2010) that different environments have varied effects on students with LD. The analysis of the data revealed that, overall, the participants had positive perceptions of their educational career. The participants' personal attitude toward making the most of their abilities, emotional and academic support from their parents and teachers, and their personal understanding of their learning disability were consistent with the three factors that Singer (2005) compiled from previous research findings, to increase the chance of more favorable outcomes for students with LD. Furthermore, the participants reflected on different aspects that influenced their perceptions of their educational career both inside

and outside the classroom, which allowed them to develop more detailed explanations of strategies that could enhance academic and social experiences of other students with LD.

The research questions that guided this study were:

- (1) What academic and social experiences do YALD report having throughout their elementary and secondary schooling?
- (2) What experiences were positive and which were negative and why?
- (3) What recommendations do YALD have for teachers to do or change in their classrooms to better accommodate students with LD?

Through answering the interview questions, the participants revealed their thoughts and understandings, individually and collectively, about their educational career through elementary and secondary school. Collectively, their responses addressed these research questions.

Academic Experiences

As discussed, given the complexity of LD, all of the participants have had unique experiences. Similar to Nugent's (2008) findings, some of the participants' educational needs were not the same, but the common threads among their accounts can help to provide further understanding of how LD influences students' educational experiences. Having teachers who were willing to employ non-traditional pedagogical strategies to engage students with LD was the most important factor in the participants' perceptions of their educational career.

The academic experiences reported by the participants highlighted an important part of Zack's, Laura's, and Shane's schooling. Spending most of their time in the classroom, they reflected on what they believed were positive and negative academic moments for them in school. This section begins by discussing their positive experiences, which identified the influence of the teacher and classroom in shaping the participants' experiences. The participants then identified negative academic experiences as being any activity that brought attention to their learning weaknesses to their peers. These academic experiences were influential in the participants' perceptions of school and they still remembered these experiences, even after being out of school for a few years.

Reported Positive Experiences

Teachers' role in the classroom. The majority of positive academic experiences were associated with actions taken by their teachers. A theme that was common within the literature was the importance of teachers' understanding their students and providing them with the tools and resources they need to be included and successful in the classroom. Numerous studies emphasized that teachers' roles within the classroom are very important in helping their students achieve their personal goals as learners (Hornstra et al., 2010; Klassen & Lynch, 2007; Paterson, 2007). In the current study, the participants' descriptions of their time in elementary and secondary school revealed that the teacher's knowledge of LD was a key contributing factor to the students' perception of a positive academic experience. Through their teachers having an understanding of their learning disability, the participants received more support in the classroom helping

to reduce any levels of anxiety in their learning. Furthermore, the participants explained that their teachers in secondary school, particularly their resource room teachers, had a much better understanding of LD than their teachers in elementary.

Much of the participants' discussion of positive academic experiences referred to receiving accommodations in the classroom. The use of accommodations was a coping strategy for the participants, which gave them assistance for working with their LD within the classroom. This was consistent with the findings of Alexander-Passe (2006), Barga (1996), Shessel and Reiff (1999), Singer (2005), and Singer (2008). A strong influence as to whether or not they received an accommodation was their teacher's knowledge and understanding of LD. The participants explained that their secondary school resource room teachers were often the most knowledgeable and accepting of their LD, more so than some of their regular classroom teachers in secondary school. Similar to Denhart (2008), when the participants' educators understood what was needed, the teachers no longer questioned whether the participants had an unfair advantage over the other students when given additional time or a computer to complete their work. Furthermore, teaching styles that expanded beyond simple lecturing were well-received by the participants, as were different approaches, such as kinesthetic, visual, and auditory support. These can be beneficial to all students in the classroom, not specifically directed towards accommodating students with LD.

Different classroom structures. The use of the resource room was also said to be a positive academic experience for the participants because it allowed these YALD to escape the noisy regular classroom atmosphere and go to a more relaxing and comfortable environment to complete their work. The literature on the use of resource rooms found, however, that these spaces have drawbacks as well as benefits. While findings within previous research suggested that students often said that they are more academically supported when they are in a specialized education classroom (Klingner et al., 1998; Wiener & Tardif, 2004), the literature also suggested that students with LD believed that they were more socially accepted amongst their peers when they remained in their regular classroom setting (Riddick et al., 1999). This conflict between academic and social experiences within previous research was not the case for Zack, Laura, and Shane. In fact, they said that they were both more socially and more academically supported when they were in their secondary school resource rooms. Zack, Laura, and Shane commented that they enjoyed being able to go to a space where their peers were not there to tease them. The participants preferred going to the resource room rather than staying within their regular classroom because they were familiar with the layout of the room and knew that the smaller number of students allowed them to receive more one-on-one instruction from the resource teacher.

Reported Negative Experiences

Completing classroom work. The perception amongst the participants of negative academic experiences was more apparent during their time in elementary school. This was consistent with the findings of Ingesson (2007). Having the same classroom teacher, peers, and environment all day meant that the participants were stuck within a classroom whose members often did not understand their LD. Being made to participate in different learning activities that drew attention to Zack's, Laura's, and Shane's weaknesses made it difficult for them to focus on learning. Similar to how the participants within Firth et al. (2010) and Singer (2005) reported dealing with these situations; the participants in this study expended their effort on determining how they were going to compete the task like their peers and not make their learning challenges public. Activities like note-taking were difficult for the participants because they struggled with having to write their own notes while listening to the teacher. This task, which may often be taken for granted by others, is often a very difficult skill for students with LD (Alexander-Passe, 2008). The participants had to choose whether to listen to the teacher and understand concepts but not have study notes or to take their own notes, which meant focusing their energy on the act of writing but not really comprehending what was being taught. As the example of note-taking demonstrated, the reliance of the participants' elementary teachers on traditional classroom dynamics often failed to meet the learning needs of all of the students in the class.

Furthermore, taking tests is a common experience in school, but, for students with LD, this experience can be challenging. Unless they have the proper accommodations, such as additional time and a quiet space to write away from their peers, to assist in their test-taking, these students are put at a disadvantage in comparison to their peers. Zack reported completing his test orally at the front of the classroom, while his peers wrote behind him. These types of experiences contributed the participants to feelings of self-consciousness and frustration when they would do classroom work. This was consistent with the findings of Riddick (1996). Accounts like Zack's should remind teachers that simply providing an accommodation is often not enough and that consideration must also be given to the social effects on the student.

Social Experiences

The participants have demonstrated that having a learning disability does not only affect their academic abilities, it also affects different social aspects of their lives. This was consistent with the findings of Riddick et al. (1999), Seo et al. (2008), and Shessel and Reiff (1999). Similar to the preceding section on academic experiences, this section will begin by discussing the reported positive social experiences from the participants. Through their personal understanding of what their learning disability meant and how they felt, their LD was a part of their identity. Having the social support they needed influenced their self-acceptance, leading to more positive social experiences. This section also addresses the reported negative social experiences from the participants. The overarching theme that the participants reported influencing their more negative social

experiences was the misunderstanding of LD among their teachers and peers. This misunderstanding demonstrated the need for teachers and peers become more aware about LD.

Reported Positive Experiences

Self-understanding of LD. The data analysis revealed that the self-awareness of an individual with a learning disability was a strong component in assisting with the comprehension of his or her learning disability, a relationship that is well documented in the literature (Denhart, 2008; Ingesson, 2007). Reflecting on their strengths and weaknesses as learners inside and outside the classroom, the participants know what they must do to be successful at school. The participants were comfortable with who they were and did not speak a great deal about the desire to be free of their learning disability. In turn, the literature argued that students' understanding of their learning disability is crucial in allowing them to determine what they need in school (Ingesson, 2007; McNulty, 2003; Terras et al., 2009). This understanding was not always clear to the participants when they were in elementary and secondary school as they sometimes struggled with understanding what was happening to them. However, they relied on their parents as "benefactor[s]" (Barga, 1996, p. 417) to start building their awareness of their own learning disability. As they progressed through school, they developed an enhanced understanding of both their learning disability and the accommodations it required.

Having social support. Similar to Baumeister et al. (2008), the participants in this study discussed how at times, they experienced teasing from their peers. However, when they found peers who accepted them, even if it was only one or two people, Zack, Laura, and Shane were able to be part of a social group that did not view a learning disability as a reason for exclusion. This was consistent with the findings of Estell et al., (2008). These friends provided a support system for the participants and helped them through different academic and social struggles in school. The lessons that they learned from this social interaction continue to influence Zack's, Laura's, and Shane's adult lives. For instance, both Zack and Laura explained that having such a support system enabled them to strengthen their social skills and enhance their understanding of conversational elements like sarcasm, a concept they originally had difficulty comprehending.

Reported Negative Experiences

Misunderstanding of LD. The previous literature demonstrated the persistent role of society in determining how normality affects teachers' and peers' perceptions of LD (Dudley-Marling, 2004; Reid & Valle, 2004). Negative stereotypes and stigmas about LD can influence the acceptance of LD within the classroom, creating difficult situations for students. Zack's, Laura's, and Shane's experiences reflect a lack of social awareness by teachers and students within their schools, especially elementary schools. The idea among teachers was that the participants were not working hard enough and being lazy reinforced social stigmas surrounding LD, similar to the findings of Denhart (2008). As well, the participants discussed how they experienced "bullying" (Laura, January 26, 96)

from their peers who sometimes referred to them as being “stupid” and a “retard” (Zack, November 17, 256). Zack recognized the strength of these pre-conceived notions of LD when some of his peers asked him to explain what his learning disability and ADHD were and what these meant. Although Zack initially appreciated their efforts to understand, he realized later on that their interest was only initiated by their fear that they had a learning disability or ADHD because they saw “a lot of themselves in me” (Zack, November 17; 274–275). In these situations, Zack further understood the extent of disconnect between how society views a learning disability and what a learning disability actually is.

Their experiences highlighted how the abilities of students with LD are sometimes socially constructed, but Zack, Laura, and Shane demonstrated, as much of the literature has suggested, that having a learning disability is a real facet of their everyday lives (Ingesson, 2007; McNulty, 2003; Shessel & Reiff, 1999). Society’s views of LD as being different and not normal contribute to the creation of barriers, such as bullying and non-belief in the existence of LD, which students with LD often face within school.

Interconnection of Academic and Social Experiences

One of the contributions this research made was exposing how some of the experiences discussed by the participants were difficult to classify as either an academic or social experience. The literature has often been focused on addressing either academic or social experiences (Estell et al., 2008; Gwernan-Jones & Burden, 2010; Klassen & Lynch, 2007; Riddick, 1996). The participants from this study have shown that

sometimes these experiences are interconnected. The participants discussed how different academic activities become social experiences as well.

Being inside the regular classroom and participating in different daily academic activities often showed the participants' struggles to the rest of the class. For example, the participants explained how, when they were asked to read aloud, pass their work to others, or be in group presentations, the weaknesses associated with their learning disability—reading, writing, and social skills—became evident to their peers. This was consistent with the findings of Alexander-Passe (2008), Estall et al. (2008), Moats (2009), and Shessel and Reiff (1999). Through these experiences, the participants often became self-conscious because they believed their peers were judging their abilities to be below the rest of the class. Thus, the participants said that they were being criticized socially for their academic struggles. I believe that researchers and teachers should acknowledge that experiences within school cannot always be clearly distinguished as either academic or social; there is frequently interplay between these two facets of students' experiences. The participants' accounts further suggested that teachers needed to be aware of the complexity of LD and the multifaceted ways in which their pedagogy can affect a student's perceptions and experiences of school.

The Resource Room

The resource room was a space where the participants felt they could escape from their daily challenges within their regular classroom. The relaxed physical environment of the participants' secondary school resource room was previously discussed; however,

the resource room was another example of the interconnection of academic and social experiences from the participants. Similar to Klingner et al. (1998) and Nugent (2008), the participants in this study reported that going to the resource room was an opportunity for them to use an unobtrusive resource where they were supported academically and socially within their learning. The role of the resource room and the resource teacher were key elements of the participants' perceptions and were discussed in the interviews. The participants said that it was a place where they could go to do their work with the accommodations they needed, such as having physical space, additional time, and one-on-one interaction with the resource teacher. As well, people within the resource room understood each other's learning differences; consequently their peers also in the resource room tended not to tease each other.

Advice for Teachers

Zack, Laura, and Shane discussed various aspects of their educational career and, through their narratives, they provided suggestions to help teachers get to know and educate students with LD. As suggested in the literature, teachers often do not know how to work with students with LD (Gwernan-Jones, 2009; Wadlington et al., 2008). Therefore, receiving recommendations from students who have been affected by lack of understanding of LD would help to address the issue from a perspective that is often overlooked within research (Burden & Burdett, 2007). The two main pieces of advice that the participants had were getting to know your students and changing the classroom environment. Each is expanded upon below.

Getting To Know Your Students

The most common and essential advice for teachers from the participants was for educators to talk with their students about their learning disability and discuss accommodations. The literature suggested that communication between teachers and students could influence the learning experience of students with LD (Bender, 1992; Klassen & Lynch, 2007; Paterson, 2007). Through getting to know the students directly, teachers can enhance their understanding of different exceptionalities and can learn what they need to have within the classroom. Sometimes a teacher's knowledge of LD may be more one-dimensional because he or she perceives it as solely an academic disability, an understanding that the teacher may have developed through possibly doing his or her own research about an exceptionality or through previous experiences with another student. The literature also suggested that a teacher's lack of understanding of LD could limit students' achievement in that class (Hornstra et al., 2010; Wadlington et al., 2008).

This study reinforced the finding that dealing with students with LD is very complex and heterogeneous. Therefore, talking with a student directly will help educators to identify specific areas of academic and social strengths and weaknesses when teaching that student to help them reach their goals as learners. The participants needed and wanted their teachers' support and understanding when they were inside and outside the classroom. All firmly believed that a great way to start was for teachers to talk with the students about their LD.

Changing The Classroom Environment

Making the regular classroom environment more relaxed and comfortable like the resource room was another recommendation given by the participants. As previously discussed, the participants felt more comfortable when they were in the resource room because of its calmer atmosphere and fewer students. This was consistent with the findings of Nugent (2008). Having a balance of visual stimuli on the walls, working areas where students can spread out their materials, teaching outside of the classroom, and granting permission to listen to music without disrupting others were some suggestions from the participants to help with the transformation. The literature demonstrated that teachers who understood LD and what their students needed often used these innovative teaching practices. Through the use of these practices students with LD can know see their teacher demonstrating their understanding of LD; however, there is a need for all teachers to use these practices (Alexander-Passe, 2008; Polychroni et al., 2006). Realizing that it will be a difficult task to make the regular classroom environment exactly like that of the resource room, the participants still wanted to encourage teachers to try.

Research Contributions

In this section I draw attention to the limitations of this study, but then emphasize the contributions that this study made, even with these limitations. Like much qualitative research, this study involved a small number of participants. In addition, the participants were recruited using a listserv of a program that promotes self-efficacy for students with

LD. Thus students who participated in the program may have had higher levels of self-esteem and have been more likely and prepared to go on to post-secondary education than others with LD who did not participate in such a program. Using a different source of recruitment to allow for participants who did not want to attend post-secondary would have provided a different perspective in educational experiences that was not captured in this data.

This research made contributions that are not common within the existing literature. The voices of YALD within a qualitative research design were able to bring enrichment to the literature that mainly consisted of older quantitative studies, usually samples with wider age ranges (Barga, 1996; Riddick et al., 1999, Shessel & Reiff, 1999). Identifying the strong relationship between academic and social experiences, reported by these three participants, enhanced our understanding of the complexity of the classroom environment for students with LD.

In addition, this research has highlighted the importance of the secondary school resource teacher's role in shaping the participants' educational experiences. The role of the resource teacher within elementary or secondary school was not brought out in the extant literature; however, the participants in this study identified that their secondary school resource teacher was a key component in creating an environment within the resource room that was not like their regular classroom. The participants reported that the resource room focused on understanding who they were as people rather than focusing simply on the characteristics of their learning disability. Moreover, secondary school can

be a difficult transition for students with LD because of dealing with social pressures, going through adolescence, and having different teachers for each course. Yet Zack, Laura, and Shane all recognized that the unobtrusive nature of their secondary school resource room gave them the social and emotional support as well as the academic support they needed to handle their everyday challenges in school.

The participants reported they established relationships with both the teachers and peers in their secondary school resource room. The development of these relationships contributed to building their self-confidence and their desire to leave their regular classroom and go to the resource room. Previous research findings have reported that students with LD often became self-conscious when they left their regular classroom setting to go to a more specialized classroom like a resource room (Nugent, 2008; Wiener & Tardif, 2004). However, the participants in this study did not report feeling self-conscious when they left their regular classroom because the resource room was a comfortable and safe environment for them that their non-LD peers did not get to experience. Furthermore, all three participants reported wishing they had received the same support that they received in their secondary school resource room while in elementary school. This research has highlighted the discrepancy in the support the participants received during their elementary and secondary years. As well, the current study emphasized the participants' desire for not only academic but also social support to further develop their self-confidence and enhance their educational experiences in elementary and secondary school.

Implications for Practice

This study has provided the perceptions of YALD about their educational experiences in elementary and secondary school. Based on these experiences, the participants provided their thoughts and comments about the practices of their teachers. Bringing awareness about LD through more in-depth training of teachers can help enhance their practice of working with students with exceptionalities. Much of the literature revealed that teachers were unaware of how to teach students with LD because they did not have specific courses of instruction during their professional training (Gwernan-Jones & Burden, 2010; Moats, 2009; Richardson, 1996). The implications of this current research demonstrated the importance of providing teachers with a foundational understanding of the various exceptionalities that could exist within their classrooms during their career; as well, it is important for teachers to demonstrate through their pedagogy their knowledge of LD to their students in the classroom. Currently, within the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) programs in Ontario, taking special education as a program focus to help develop an introductory knowledge about exceptionalities is not mandatory. After completing the B.Ed program, trained teachers can elect to take additional qualifications (AQ) courses approved by the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT). Again taking of special education AQ courses is also not mandatory, contributing to some teachers' continued lack of understanding of LD.

The notion that special education training is not necessary for regular classroom teachers is inaccurate because, with the increasing identification of exceptionalities amongst students, regular classroom teachers frequently have to work with students with LD (Barga, 1996). Willingness to further develop their professional learning can enhance teachers' ability to understand their students and help their students by providing the support they need inside and outside the classroom. Consequently, making special education training mandatory for all teachers could contribute to an increased awareness about different exceptionalities and understandings of how to teach students with LD within the classroom.

Implications For Future Research

The results from this study supplement the existing literature about the experiences of students with LD within a classroom. The responses provided by Zack, Laura, and Shane revealed the successes and challenges that students with LD encounter when they are in elementary and secondary school and the need for more comprehensive exceptionalities training for teachers. Further research carried out within this field would help to enhance teachers', parents', schools', and society's awareness of LD.

Areas that could be examined further include exploring why elementary school teachers have less knowledge and understanding of LD within their classrooms than secondary teachers. The participants in this study revealed that they experienced the most difficulty with managing their LD in elementary school because there was little awareness amongst the elementary teachers and no resource room. However, the

retrospect nature of the data must be taken into consideration. Remembering experiences that occurred more than ten years ago may contribute to recollecting a patchwork of experiences rather than a holistic recent recollection, like the recollection of secondary school experiences. More research to determine if there is, in fact, less awareness and understanding among elementary school teachers or if the situation was contingent on the participants of this study would provide further insight into how teachers' knowledge influences their own perceptions of accommodations for students with LD within the elementary classroom.

Conducting a study that has a larger sample size with a wider geographic region, including larger urban areas, could allow for further in-depth explanations of different elementary and secondary school experiences and the perceptions held by the participants regarding their educational career. The three participants of this study were from smaller Eastern Ontario cities. As well, Zack and Shane reported that making friends was not difficult for them in school, but for Laura socially interacting with her peers was major challenge. Therefore, comparing the difference in experiences of males and females would provide a unique perspective within LD research. Additionally, this study used YALD who completed a program designed to help students with LD learn more about their LD and communicate more effectively with others. A future study could recruit participants who were not in a program like OLTS to comprehend how these participants understood their LD and their awareness of accommodations available to them.

Concluding Thoughts

The participants in this research, Zack, Laura, and Shane, emphasized the influential role that the secondary school resource room teacher and resource room played for them because in this classroom they were understood as people, rather than being seen as characteristics of LD. The resource room was a space that the participants could go to when they needed to escape the discomforts and stresses of the regular classroom and that they felt was a safer environment. Their desire to go to the resource room was highlighted because the participants reported that in the resource room they had the accommodations that met their academic and social needs. Furthermore, relationships were established with both teachers and peers, which also helped to build their confidence to manage challenging academic and social situations encountered in school. The participants in this study, unlike those in previous research (e.g., Nugent, 2008; Wiener & Tardif, 2004), did not report feeling self-conscious when leaving their regular classroom to go to the resource room; rather, they expressed their feelings of enjoyment and privilege of having access to this resource when their peers did not. This research brought awareness to the often under-represented importance of the resource teacher and resource room and how they can impact students with LD during their educational career.

Through completing this research and listening to the participants describe their educational experiences, I have reflected on my own experiences of having a learning disability in school, and I feel that I have grown as a person with LD, as a researcher, and as a teacher. I was surprised by the differences between the participants' experiences and my experiences. In my experience, I received more support and accommodations from teachers in elementary than in secondary school. When I entered secondary school, most of my teachers did not understand or even acknowledge that I had a learning disability, which led to my receiving few accommodations and to awkward relationships with my teachers and peers. I was delighted to learn that the participants did not report their peers feeling that going to the resource room was an unfair advantage, because this was a common impression amongst the peers in my secondary school, that students who went to the resource room did not have to do the same amount of work as the rest of the class. Little was known by others in the school about what the resource room actually provided students and how much work was completed there. These differences should remind us of the diversity within the research field of LD and contributed to my thoughts for future research.

Although distinguishable differences exist between the participants' experiences and mine, there was also a thread of commonality between our experiences. This was especially true when the participants provided suggestions to teachers about how to work with students with LD. Getting to know your students rang true for me; I wished my teachers had communicated more with me to better understand who I was and what I

needed rather than focusing on what I have. Having the participants identify areas of improvement helped me, as an aspiring teacher, to enhance my pedagogy for my future students. The purpose of this research was to highlight the need for social awareness and pedagogical improvements within schools. But being able to listen to three YALD express their experiences in their voices also enhanced my pedagogy and awareness about LD as I embark on my teacher education program.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Email to Queen's University Regional Assessment and Resource Centre

Hello,

I don't know if you remember me, but my name is Candice Daiken. I took the On-Line To Success (OLTS) program through Queen's University Regional Assessment and Resource Centre (RARC) when I was in high school and then I worked with you going through each of the modules finding things that needed to be corrected a couple years ago. I also spoke about my experiences with my LD and how OLTS helped me to parents and students.

I am now starting my second year of my M.Ed program here at Queen's and I am working with Nancy Hutchinson as my supervisor. My research interest is looking at the social and academic experiences individuals with LD had when they went through school. I would like to get participants that are aged 18–21 so that they can reflect on their school years. I am emailing you because I was wondering if it would be possible to access a contact list (email or/and phone) of past graduates of OLTS? Or possibly circulating a page of information within an OLTS social network so all graduates can have access to it?

I wanted to contact you to see if it would be possible to go through OLTS to get participants.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns. If you would like I can meet with you to discuss details.

Thank you,

Candice Daiken
Masters of Education Candidate
Queen's University

Appendix B

Sample Participant Recruitment Email

Hello,

My name is Candice Daiken and I am a Master of Education student at Queen's University. I am doing a research study about young adults with learning disabilities and their experiences in elementary and secondary school. The purpose of this research is to use the voices of young adults with learning disabilities to better understand their academic and social experiences throughout their schooling. Having a learning disability myself I am interested in knowing more about this topic. So, I am looking for 4 participants who will share their school experiences. Providing your experiences from elementary and secondary school can help unpack a hidden knowledge about learning disabilities to help others gain a better understanding of what school is like for a student with a learning disability. It will involve two meetings with you and will take about 3 hours of your time.

All of your responses will be kept confidential. Only my supervisor, Dr. Nancy Hutchinson and I, will have access to this information. The findings may also be published in professional journals or presented at conferences, but any such presentations will never breach individual confidentiality. Should you be interested, you are entitled to a copy of the findings.

Eligibility:

To participate within this study you will need to:

- (a) have a psychological assessment when in elementary or secondary school and have been classified as having an identified learning disability
- (b) have self-identified as having a learning disability as you progressed through school

- (c) be comfortable with describing personal educational experiences
- (d) be between 18–21 years of age currently

If you are interested in participating in this study and would like more information please contact me at 5cd19@queensu.ca. Please provide a few sentences about yourself and why you would like to participate in this study within your response.

Thank you,

Candice Daiken
Master of Education Candidate
Queen's University

Appendix C

Letter of Information



Faculty of Education
511 Union Street
Kingston, Ontario
K7M 5R7

“The Hidden Knowledge of Learning Disabilities: Young Adults’ Perceptions of Elementary and Secondary School”

This research is being conducted by Candice Daiken, a Master of Education student, under the supervision of Dr. Nancy Hutchinson, in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario. This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines, and Queen's policies.

What is this study about? The purpose of this research is to use the voices of young adults with learning disabilities to better understand their academic and social experiences throughout their schooling. This is going to be done through reporting the perceptions of young adults with learning disabilities about their educational experiences. Participants will be asked to describe their elementary and secondary school experiences with having a learning disability. Through the description of their experiences, I want to highlight the social and teaching improvements needed, such as teaching strategies, and awareness of learning disabilities within schools to accommodate students in the same situation. The study will require two visits, the first will be a 60 to 90 minute audio-recorded interview and the second a 45 to 60 minute follow-up interview to allow the participant to read a brief summary of their interview and elaborate on any information they would like to add or change. This study is requesting approximately 3 hours of your time. There are no known physical, psychological, economic, or social risks associated

with this study. A Queen's University Regional Assessment and Resource Centre (RARC) counsellor will be available if any participant feels they would like to talk about their participation.

Is my participation voluntary? Yes, your participation is entirely voluntary and you are not required to answer any questions that you find objectionable or discomforting. As a participant you are free to withdraw from the study until after the second interview without consequence. To withdraw, you would inform Candice Daiken. If you do withdraw from the study, you may request to remove all or part of your data from being used in the study.

What will happen to my responses? Your responses will be kept confidential to the extent possible. Only Candice Daiken and Dr. Nancy Hutchinson will have access to this information. The findings may also be published in professional journals or presented at conferences, but any such presentations will never breach individual confidentiality. As well, in accordance with Queen's policy, data will be kept for a minimum of five years and will be destroyed after this time. Should you be interested, you are entitled to a copy of the findings.

What if I have concerns? Any questions about study participation may be directed to Candice Daiken at 5cd19@queensu.ca or my supervisor Dr. Nancy Hutchinson at hutchinn@queensu.ca or 613-533-3025. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at chair.GREB@queensu.ca or 613-533-6081.

Regards,

Candice Daiken
Master of Education Candidate
Queen's University

Appendix D
Participant Consent Form



Faculty of Education
511 Union Street
Kingston, Ontario
K7M 5R7

**“The Hidden Knowledge of Learning Disabilities: Young Adults’ Perceptions
of Elementary and Secondary School”**

Name (please print clearly): _____

1. I have read the Letter of Information and have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.

2. I understand that I will be participating in the study called *The Hidden Knowledge of Learning Disabilities: Young Adults’ Perceptions of Elementary and Secondary School*. I understand that this means that I will be asked to describe my school experiences with having a learning disability. I understand that I am volunteering approximately 3 hours of my time over two audio-recorded interview sessions.

3. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of the data now and in the future. Candice Daiken and Dr. Nancy Hutchinson will have access to the data. As well, if I decide to use the Queen’s University Regional Assessment and Resource Centre (RARC) counsellor that is available to me, the counsellor will know my identity within the study. The findings may also be published in professional journals or presented at

conferences, but any such presentations will never breach individual confidentiality. Should I be interested, I am entitled to a copy of the findings.

4. I understand that I can withdraw from the study until after the second interview and can have any of the information I gave during the study removed without consequence. But after the second interview all information given will be used within the study. I can withdraw from the study by contacting Candice Daiken.

5. I am aware that if I have any questions about my participation, I may contact Candice Daiken; 5cd19@queensu.ca; thesis supervisor, Dr. Nancy Hutchinson (613-533-3025), hutchinn@queensu.ca; or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board (613-533-6081), chair.GREB@queensu.ca at Queen's University.

I have read the above statements and freely consent to participate in this research:

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

If you would like a copy of the results from the study, please provide your email address:

Email: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix E

Ethics Approval



October 05, 2011

Ms. Candice Daiken, Master's Student
Faculty of Education
Duncan McArthur Hall
Queen's University
511 Union Street
Kingston, ON K7M 5R7

GREB Ref #: GEDUC-580-11; Romeo # 6006315
Title: "GEDUC-580-11 The Hidden Knowledge of Learning Disabilities: Young Adults' Perceptions of Elementary and Secondary School"

Dear Ms. Daiken:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "**GEDUC-580-11 The Hidden Knowledge of Learning Disabilities: Young Adults' Perceptions of Elementary and Secondary School**" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB, of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (access this form at https://eservices.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Adverse Event Report). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementations of new procedures. To make an amendment, access the application at https://eservices.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Amendment to Approved Study Form. These changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services or irvingg@queensu.ca for further review and clearance by the GREB or GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joan Stevenson".

Joan Stevenson, Ph.D.
Professor and Chair
General Research Ethics Board

cc: Dr. Nancy Hutchinson, Faculty Supervisor
Dr. Lesly Wade-Woolley, Chair, Unit REB
Erin Wicklam, c/o Graduate Studies and Bureau of Research

Appendix F

Sample Interview Questions

- 1) What does your learning disability mean to you?
- 2) Did you enjoy elementary and secondary school?
 - i. Why or why not?
- 3) How do you feel teachers treated you when you were in school?
 - i. How do you think that this treatment was related to you having a learning disability?
- 4) How do you feel peers treated you when you were in school?
 - i. How do you think that this treatment was related to you having a learning disability?
- 5) What did you like about school academically? Why?
- 6) What did you like about school socially? Why?
- 7) What did you not like about school academically? Why?
- 8) What did you not like about school socially? Why?
- 9) Can you tell me about some of your perceived positive experiences in a classroom because of your learning disability?
 - i. Why were they positive experiences for you?
- 10) Can you tell me about some of your perceived negative experiences in a classroom because of your learning disability?
 - i. Why were they negative experiences for you?

- 11) How did you feel when you were in a classroom?
 - i. Was this feeling different when you were in a resource room?
- 12) What was done to help you in a classroom?
 - i. Did you like it? Why or why not?
 - ii. Was it helpful? Why or why not?
- 13) What did your parents do to support you?
 - i. How did they help you?
- 14) What would you have liked to experience in a classroom?
 - i. What could have others have done to make this happen?
 - ii. What could you have done to make this happen?
- 15) If you could give advice to teachers, what are the most important things you would tell them?

Endnote

¹ Originally the study was designed to have four participants and the desired number of participants was recruited. However, after interviewing the fourth participant, her educational background of being home schooled for a couple of years and being placed in a resource room all day during secondary school deemed her ineligible for the purpose of this research. Accordingly, her data were not included in the study.