

**Experiences and Expectations of Adolescents with Learning Disabilities and their Families as they Transition from Secondary School to Post-Secondary Education or Employment**

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative study was designed to explore the transition experiences of youth with learning disabilities (LD) educated in the province of Ontario and their families. The primary purpose of this research was to understand what influences the decisions adolescents who have LD make about post-secondary education and employment goals and paths. The expectations and experiences of youth with LD and their families during the transition process were investigated. Adolescents and their parents were the main informants. Facilitators and barriers to the process in terms of each of the systems described in Bronfenbrenner ecological theory and Turnbull and Turnbull's family systems theory were also examined.

A case study method was used in the design of this research and data were collected following Seidman's three-interview process. Five families consisting of the youth with LD, at least one parent, and in four cases, a sibling participated in this study. The questions focused on family interactions, roles, and the decision-making process. Data from the 18 participants were coded and arranged according to the research questions which were linked to the central ideas in the theoretical framework. The findings revealed that parents' expectations influenced the decision-making about post high school goals and paths by the youth and their families. In contrast to previous research, it was found that parents' expectations were generally high for their children with LD and were shaped by their own post high school experiences. The dynamics of family relationships and roles during transition planning depended on the time of diagnosis of LD (primary grades vs. senior high school), attitudes towards LD by the parents, advocacy by parents, self-advocacy abilities of the youth with LD, and the nature of relations among siblings. Additionally, none of the youth with LD had a formal transition plan and the data showed that teachers could facilitate or hinder the transition process. Also emerging from the data were three types of advocacy that were practised by parents.

The study findings add to our knowledge about the transition process and in particular how decisions are made and the factors that influence them. Moreover, this study gives a voice to youth with LD and their families as they described their transition experiences to post-secondary education or employment.

**Word count:** 360

**Key words:** learning disabilities, transition planning, ecological systems theory, family systems theory

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Doing a Ph.D. had always been a dream of mine. When I look back at my education, how difficult learning was for me as a student identified with LD, I know that part of my mission in school was to prove myself, to show that I belonged in the classroom and that I could learn! After my second university degree I knew that I was “smart” enough. I knew that I did not have to prove that to myself anymore, now I needed to prove to the world that children who have LD belonged in the classroom because they have the capacity to learn! I looked at graduate school as a privilege, a chance to learn about myself, to indulge in my passions. But when times got tough, and they did! I would tell myself, “if you can’t do it for them, who will?” In the end it was not my smarts that earned a Ph.D. it was my perseverance. Perseverance got me through the hard times, from that day in grade 1 when I knew that I was not learning like the other kids to today as I sit typing these words and put my Ph.D. thesis to bed for the last time.

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## Chapter 1 – Introduction

You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You're on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the one who'll decide where to go...

— Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*

Making decisions about career choices is a challenge for all adolescents as they progress through secondary school. For the adolescent diagnosed with a learning disability (LD), the challenge is much greater. Research shows that many young adults who have learning disabilities have poor post-school outcomes (Murray, Goldstein, Nourse, and Edgar, 2000), which suggests that among other things the transition from high school to post-secondary education or work may not have gone as planned. The purpose of this research was to examine the educational experiences and expectations that adolescents diagnosed with LD and their family members have of their secondary school experiences as they are engaged in the process of transitioning from high school to post-secondary education or employment. The aim of this research was to gain insights into how adolescents who have LD make decisions regarding their transition and what factors influenced the decisions. Data for this qualitative research were collected mainly by in-depth interviews with adolescents and family members who were engaged in the transition process. Five families participated in this research study, which included 18 participants who reflected on their experiences and expectations of the transition experiences of the adolescent with LD.

This chapter begins with background and contextual information regarding the outcomes of individuals who have learning disabilities, including gaps found in the research and the researcher's problem statement. Next, the researcher will state the purpose of the study and the research questions. Then, a description of the research approach is presented and lastly the rationale and significance of this study will be explained, and a description of key terms used throughout the text is included.

### **Background and Context**

In terms of the population of exceptional students in Canada's education system, more than half of these students have been diagnosed with learning disabilities (Friend, Bursuck, & Hutchinson, 1998; Santrock, Woloshyn, Gallagher, Petta, & Marini, 2010). Research conducted

in the United States has shown that, three to five years out of secondary school only 30% of students who have LD attend a post-secondary institution compared to 68.3% of students without disabilities (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, and Levine, 2005). As well, the competitive employment opportunities for individuals with LD are less promising than for non-disabled individuals (Colley & Jamison, 1998; Wagner et al., 2005). Some researchers have concluded that youth with LD are not adequately prepared at the secondary school level for post-secondary studies (Murray et al. 2000). A current goal in secondary schools in Canada and the United States is on implementing programs that help students transition out of school and into employment and educational opportunities (Kohler & Field, 2003). With focus on transition planning, several researchers have examined the effectiveness of preparing students who have disabilities for transition. Current research demonstrates that the best way to study effective transition preparation at the secondary school level is through the examination of student outcomes (Bens, Lindstrom & Yovanoff, 2000; Benz, Yovanoff & Doren, 1997; Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, & Shaver, 2010; Rojewski, 1996). There is limited research in Canada on transition planning for student with disabilities and fewer studies on the outcomes of students who have learning disabilities. Although we do not have comparable statistics in Canada we can draw some understanding of this phenomenon from studies conducted in the United States. Moreover, this study will contribute to filling the gap in our understanding of this phenomenon in Canada.

The results of recent studies conducted in the United States suggest the outcomes for this group are improving. In terms of preparation for post-school employment for students who have disabilities, the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS-2) conducted in 2005 reported that 86% of youth with disabilities were likely to be employed or attending post-secondary education, 21% higher than those interviewed in 1990. These researchers stated the goal for adolescents is to find employment that offers benefits, a living wage, and opportunities for advancement in the workplace (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, & Shaver, 2010). In North American's modern society, this type of employment requires higher education skills. Not surprisingly, these researchers found that 20% of youth with disabilities were engaged in the dual role of working part-time and pursuing post-secondary education (Newman et al., 2010). In terms of facilitating the transition to employment, several studies from the United States emphasize the importance of vocational education, as well as school-to-work transition programs to give

students the skills needed to find competitive employment (Baer, Flexer, Beck, Amstutz, Hoffman, Brothers, Stilzer & Zechman, 2003; Benz, Yovanoff & Doren, 1997). Likewise, preparation for the post-secondary education route for students with LD requires clearly defined educational and career goals, a commitment to academics, and a personal set of self-advocacy strategies (Baer et al. 2003). However, even when these factors are present, research still does not show that individuals with LD are pursuing higher education or obtaining competitive employment at a rate comparable to their non-disabled peers (Newman et al., 2010; Wagner, 2005). Moreover, the recent NTLS-2 found that family members influence the transition goals that students with LD have for themselves (Wagner et al. 2005). The effects of environmental conditions of individuals, such as parental expectations, were found to have the greatest impact on student outcomes (Baer et al., 2003; Fullarton, 2006; Reis, Neu & McGuire, 1997). Therefore, it is important to include the interactions between the individual and his or her family when examining the facilitators and barriers to successful outcomes for students with LD.

Transition services are now mandatory in special education programs across Canada and the United States with the aim of helping all students with disabilities, plan and achieve transition goals (Benz, Lindstrom, Yovanoff, 2000). Studies conducted in the United States point to programs that have been effective in their transition outcomes and highlight a number of factors. These include a supportive school environment, student involvement in the decision and planning process, as well as assistance from family and community in helping individuals with LD work toward specific goals (Kohler & Field, 2003). However, research looking at how students are being prepared to transition to post-secondary education find that university and college faculty and special service providers feel that students are not well prepared to advocate for themselves once they begin to attend these institutions (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Murray, Flannery, & Wren, 2008).

There are gaps in research concerning the transition experiences of individuals with LD in Canada. Much of the research done concerning transitioning individuals with disabilities was done in the United States. With the knowledge that students with LD typically have poor post-school outcomes, a Canadian study investigating how individuals with LD make decisions as they transition is important in identifying the facilitators and barriers that may lead these individuals into successful post-school experiences. A list of key terms can be found in Appendix A)

## **Problem Statement**

Individuals who have LD have average to above average intelligence (Lyon, 1996). They may also have the intellectual potential to achieve a post-secondary education and competitive employment. However, they do not achieve these opportunities at a rate comparable to the general population (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, & Shaver, 2010). Transition services are improving the outcomes for individuals who have LD; yet the gaps in outcomes are visible (Newman et al.). Moreover, family expectations influence the goals that individuals with LD set for themselves (Wagner et al. 2005). Many of these expectations are low, perhaps due to stigma or due to low levels of achievement in school (Wagner et al, 2005; Whitley et al., 2007). With the potential to achieve successful outcomes, along with the stigma of the label “learning disability”, what do adolescents who have LD experience when navigating their transition out of secondary school and into post-secondary education or employment? What are their expectations regarding their transition goals and what factors influence these decisions?

## **Theoretical Perspectives**

The two theories guiding this research are Bronfenbrenner’s Ecology of Human Development (1979) and Family Systems Theory (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). These theories will be explained in further detail in Chapter 2, a diagram of these models can be found in the Appendices (see Appendix B). Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory has been used extensively in research concerning individuals with disabilities and their families (Boyd & Bee, 2006). Bronfenbrenner’s theory suggests that development is explained in terms of relationships between people and their environments at the micro, meso, exo and macro level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In particular this study will examine dyadic interactions (interactions including two parties) and triadic interactions (interactions including three parties). Because this study focused on family interactions, family roles and the decision making process, this theory was thought to be a good fit. It enabled the researcher to look at how each member of the family shared in the transition planning of the adolescent with LD.

Family Systems Theory seeks to understand “what a family is and how it functions” (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997, p.97) (see Appendix C). There are four main areas of family systems theory. First, family characteristics provide the input into the system, these include: family size, form, and special challenges like poverty or disability. Second, family interaction is the process component, including the roles, relationships, and communication among family

members. Third, family functions are regarded as the output of the family system. These include required responsibilities necessary to meet the needs of each member, such as, economic, social, physical, emotional and educational needs. Fourth, family life cycle included changes and transitions that happen to a family over time (Turnbull & Turnbull). Family Systems will be examined within the microsystem level of Bronfenbrenner's Ecology of Human Development. Included in the family systems analysis is a description of Alfred Adler's ideas on sibling relationships (Adler, 1927).

### **Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

The focus of this study was to understand what decisions adolescents who have learning disabilities make regarding their post-secondary school and employment outcomes. The primary research question was, what are the expectations and experiences of students who have learning disabilities and their families with regard to the transition process? Secondary research questions were included to assure that the researcher created an interview protocol that would gain information about how the environment both influenced and was influenced by these decisions. They included:

- What at the Microsystem (adolescent-family/teachers) level facilitates or acts as a barrier to successful transitions for student who have learning disabilities into post-secondary education or employment?
- What at the Mesosystem (interactions between student, school, home) level facilitates or acts as a barrier to successful transitions for students with learning disabilities into post-secondary education or employment?
- What at the Exosystem (triadic interactions) level facilitates or acts as a barrier to successful transitions for students with learning disabilities into post-secondary education or employment?
- What at the Macrosystem (Society) level facilitates or acts as a barrier to successful transitions for students with learning disabilities into post-secondary education or employment?

Information gained from the different perspectives of participants provided a deeper description of the transition process. Using the views of each member in the family system (adolescent with LD, mother, father, and siblings), allowed the researcher to gain a multifaceted perspective of the transition process. Once data were collected from each individual it could be

organized into Bronfenbrenner's nest of systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Organizing the data according to interactions within each of these systems allowed the researcher to see how the environment surrounding the individuals with LD impacted the decisions that they made regarding their transition into education or employment. As well, these interactions allowed the researcher to understand the transition experience through the lens of the interactions, experiences, expectations, and perceptions of the family.

### **Description of Chapters**

This thesis has been organized into eleven chapters that focus on the specific goals of the research. Chapter 1, the introduction, sets up the research focus and purpose for this study. Chapter 2, provides a comprehensive review of literature on the topic of transitioning students who have learning disabilities. Issues pertinent to this discussion include gender, employment outcomes, post-secondary educational outcomes, transition planning, advocacy, as well as other relevant themes. In Chapter 3, the purpose, research questions, and methodology are described in detail. In Chapters 4 to 9, the findings in detailed case studies of the experiences of each of the five families, as they navigate their school system and work to successfully transition the adolescent with LD out of secondary school and into employment or post-secondary education are presented. Following the case studies, a cross-case analysis is provided. The discussion of the findings of this study is presented in Chapter 10. Chapter 11 concludes the findings of the study and contributions to knowledge, limitations of the study, and recommendations for further research are described.

### **Rationale and Significance of the Study**

This study was guided primarily by two theories: Bronfenbrenner's *Ecology of Human Development* (1979) and Turnbull and Turnbull's *Family Systems Theory* (1997), and examined the phenomena of transitioning under the lens of these two theories in a Canadian context. The findings will also advance our understanding of the theories. Findings from this study will contribute to our knowledge of a) what influences the transition decisions of adolescents who have LD in Canada as they transition out of secondary school and into post-secondary education or employment, b) factors influencing these decisions, and c) the facilitators and barriers to effective transitions for adolescents with LD in Canada.

## Chapter 2 – Review of the Literature

### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand what influences the decisions adolescents with LD make in terms of their transition goals as they make decisions about their education and career paths. Specifically, the researcher examined the educational experiences and family expectations of these adolescents to uncover answers as to what decisions are made and why.

To carry out this study it was necessary to engage in a focused review of research related to learning disabilities and transition planning. The researcher examined several themes related to these topics, including: learning disabilities and outcomes and examining facilitators and barriers found in research concerning the transition to post-secondary education and employment. Other themes included in the literature review relate to environmental and personal characteristics that might have influence on transition decisions, including: gender, family, and how individual characteristics help or hinder student outcomes. The first section of the literature review describes outcomes for students who have LD. The second part presents research concerning transitions to higher education and employment. The third section of the literature review examines characteristics related to the individual and the family. Lastly, the fourth part describes the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's, Ecology of Human Development (1979) paired with Turnbull and Turnbull's Family Systems Theory (1997) and including a description of Alfred Adler's (1927) ideas on sibling relationships.

Multiple sources were used to collect research for this literature review including: peer reviewed journals, dissertations, internet sources and books that were accessed through a university database. Search databases included: Scholar's Portal, Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), e-journal, RACER, and ProQuest Digital Dissertations. Internet resources included material accessed from the Learning Disabilities Associate of Ontario (LDAO) and Google Scholar. The researcher set the search criteria to find articles published since 2000. A few older articles were used only when the researcher found the findings to be valuable. Key search terms included: transition planning, learning disabilities, education outcomes, employment outcomes, ecological systems theory, family systems theory, Adler siblings.

## **Learning Disabilities**

Learning disabilities are holistic in nature, neurobiological, genetic, life-long, and affect all areas of life (Brown, 2008). One area of life affected by a learning disability (LD) is education; individuals who have LD are at risk of academic failure. Academic failure causes children, adolescents, and adults to exhibit high levels of frustration, anxiety, withdrawal, social isolation, depression, and low self-esteem (Lyon, 1996). Beginning at age 14, almost 30% of students who have disabilities drop out of school (Thurlow, Sinclair, & Johnson, 2002). In this population, students who have learning disabilities had higher dropout rates than those who had more severe disabilities and were two times more likely to drop out than their peers (Thurlow et al., 2002). Historically, according to the Learning Disability Association of Ottawa-Carleton (LDAO-C), “The failure of the school system to help these students learn in a method appropriate to their abilities often meant that they faced inordinate struggles in their attempts to comply with the requirements of a system that did not recognize their talents and they often left school at the earliest opportunity.”(LDAO-C, 2011, p.2) As an invisible disability, learning disabilities are unique and are misunderstood within society. The disparity of having average or higher than average intelligence paired with areas of difficulty result in poor academic performance and often social problems, creates confusion and frustration in children, adolescents, and adults, as well as parents who do not understand why their child is not achieving (Litner, Mann-Feder, & Guérard, 2005). A disconnect between the intellectual potential and their lower achievement becomes a focus for those struggling to understand why they do not measure up. Some individuals are resilient and develop self-advocacy strategies, while others turn to learned-helplessness behaviours (Litner et al., 2005). The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (2005) has identified that 1 in 10 Canadians have a diagnosis of LD. With an increase in awareness and acceptance and with more screening in schools, the number of adolescents and adults who self-identified as having LD has increased 40% between 2001 and 2006 indicating the need to focus transition planning services toward this population (LDAO-C, 2011). With the potential to achieve but the inability to produce, “the emotional toll on an intelligent child who is struggling and misunderstood can be devastating” (LDAO-C, 2011, p. 2). Hence, these individuals who have LD are at risk of developing secondary disorders, such as anxiety, depression and other mental illnesses (Cooray & Bakale, 2005).

There is a need to assist these individuals in understanding what is possible to achieve in terms of post-secondary education and employment outcomes. Moreover, supports are needed to educate all stakeholders (parents, educators, diagnosed individuals) in learning how to achieve success when diagnosed with LD.

Part of the difficulty in identifying and diagnosing LD is that it is a complicated and misunderstood disability. Different countries and provinces define the term in varying ways. In the UK, *learning disability* is used as an umbrella term to describe all exceptionalities from physical to intellectual impairments. In Canada, the definition differs among provinces. For example, Alberta considers Attention Deficit Disorder with Hyperactivity (ADHD) to be an LD while in Ontario, an LD encompasses processing deficits in reading, language, and math and does not include behavioural disorders. In Ontario, the LDAO describes LD as “referring to a number of disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information” (LDAO, 2013 p.1). In his article, *Learning Disabilities*, Lyon (1996), says “the concept of learning disability focuses on the notion of discrepancy between a child’s academic achievement and his or her apparent capacity to learn” (p.54). He goes on to say that “the longer children are faced with failure the greater the probability that co-morbid learning and behaviour difficulties will arise, further complicating the remediation task” (p. 59).

The notion of stigma is an issue that each individual who has LD must learn to deal with. Brown (2008) conducted an ethnography at a Canadian university with students identified with LD. This author explored the social model of disability and found that it “makes a social appearance – it is present in our everyday interactions, present in how we make meaning of the world” (p. 1). A person who has any type of disability struggles with the notion of normalcy and how to fit into a society that does not always value differences. In particular, Brown (2008) makes the point that many individuals who have LD learn about their disability as they navigate the school curriculum through performative measures and skill sets that are important in the classroom setting. These students learn about their abilities and inabilities by comparing themselves with other students. They construct a baseline for what is normal and then find themselves to be lacking by comparison (Brown). The idea of being deficient sets roots within these students and permeates outside the classroom into all areas of the students’ lives, “mediocrity was woven into, part of, and inseparable from the ways in which they understand

themselves, their social world, and their place in that world that included notions of normalcy, disability, and schooling” (p. 1). Brown (2008) makes the point that the purpose of schooling is to create opportunity for students, yet divisions are set based on ability and disability. Hence, in order to create a sense of normalcy, students need to view their disability not as a “challenge that needs to be fixed” but rather “through challenging those common sense notions that disability is something to be fixed” (p. 3). Instead it is useful to look at success as the ability to work through struggles and, by making use of available resources, help individuals who have LD to demonstrate their abilities.

Students who have LD face a variety of challenges in constructing a positive self-image and in deconstructing the social view of disability. Brown (2008) says that students as well as all individuals who have LD struggle to be and feel normal, strive to perform as others do, and find a sense of “normal”. Her point is that we must construct the notion of what is normal through the understanding that being different is normal; therefore, no longer should the term *disability* be equated with the term *mediocrity*. In another qualitative Canadian study, Duquette and Fullarton (2009) examined the educational and employment experiences of 10 adults who had recently been diagnosed with LD and found that not only can a diagnosis create a path to successful outcomes for individuals who have LD, but it also minimizes negative experiences because it marshals the attention and assistance from parents, teachers, and administration that can lead to academic achievement. Those individuals who go through their education with an undiagnosed LD may never gain “a sense of achievement and as adults will feel —paused as they struggle to make their way in life” (p. 18).

The above studies point to the notion that students with LD are at high risk of failure, academically, socially, and emotionally. Having a diagnosis in order to move forward with services and to develop LD awareness is important. Arguably one of the most important services available to students with LD are transition programs.

### **Transition Programs**

Historically, students with disabilities have been under-represented in post-secondary educational institutions and have been underemployed (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). In recent years, transition services have become mandatory in special education programs across Canada and the United States to help students plan for and achieve employment and post-secondary education goals (Benz, Lindstrom & Yovanoff, 2000; Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Statistics

Canada and the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada). Of all students with disabilities enrolled in special education programs in public secondary schools in the United States, 55.7% are individuals who have a diagnosed LD (Wagner & Blackorby, 1996; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, and Levine, 2005). In the United States, the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was amended in 1997 to address how “students’ entire high school program can be planned to foster success in high school and in their transition to post-school employment, continuing education, and independent living” (Benz et al. 2000, p. 509). In Ontario, the issue of planning for students who have disabilities to transition from secondary school to employment and/or post-secondary education has become a mandatory part of every special education student’s Individual Education Plan (IEP) (IEP-A Resource Guide, 2004). In recognizing that school programs play a key role in facilitating transitions for every student within the school community, amendments were made to government documents to detail the expectations for transitioning these students. In the United States, “the primary purpose of the free appropriate public education guaranteed to children and youth with disabilities is to ‘prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living’” ([IDEA 2004 sec. 601 (d)(1)(A)] cited in Wagner et al., 2005). Furthermore, education for students who have disabilities is “designed to be within a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child’s movement from school to post-school activities” [sec. 602 (34)(A)] cited in Wagner et al., 2005).

In Ontario, transition services in school are meant to open doors for students with disabilities by taking their interests, strengths, and needs into consideration when developing the transition plan. It is supposed to act as a plan of action that is developed by the student, special education teacher, principal, parents, and community to facilitate positive post-secondary school outcomes for students (IEP-A Resource Guide, 2004). Therefore, secondary schools can have a considerable influence on the post-secondary school education and employment opportunities for individuals who have LD. In Ontario, the implementation of the transition plan began in 2002. To date there have been few studies conducted in Canada or the United States, that have presented the outcomes and/or transition experiences of students who have LD and who participated in transition planning while in secondary school.

## **Transition to Post-Secondary Education**

Statistics from the United States using the NTLs-2 tell us that about one-third of students who have LD enrol in post-secondary educational institutions (Wagner et al., 2005). However, this percentage is much lower than their peers without disabilities. Not only are youth with learning disabilities less likely than those without disabilities to enrol in post-secondary education, the majority of those who do, attend training programs and community colleges (Wagner et al., 2005). As well, 80.5% of students with LD who entered post-secondary education do not graduate five years after they completed high school, compared to 56.5% of those without disabilities. Ten years after high school completion, 56% have not graduated compared to 32% of students without disabilities (Murray, Goldstein, Nourse, & Edgar, 2000). These poor outcomes may be a symptom of the fact that only one in five students disclose their LD upon entering a post-secondary program (Wagner et al., 2005). A significant difference between secondary school and post-secondary education is that in secondary school, “the burden is on the school to find and serve the student...in higher education the burden is on the student...to find the appropriate services and navigate through their education” (Wolanin & Steele, 2004, p. 27). With few individuals diagnosed with LD entering post-secondary education and with even fewer attaining diplomas or degrees, the implication could be drawn that youth with learning disabilities are not being properly prepared in their secondary school setting for post-secondary experiences (Murray et al., 2000). As well, other factors such as inappropriate post-secondary programs, lack of supportive faculty and administration, and personal situations could be the cause of student attrition. It is well known that enrolment of students with LD in academic programs while in high school is linked with enrolment of students with LD in post-secondary education (Baer et al., 2003). However, it does not necessarily mean that these students will be well prepared for further academic education. Therefore, Milson, Akos, and Thompson (2004) created small group (n = 6) workshops with students who have LD to get an understanding of how prepared they were for post-secondary education. The authors reported that students with LD who took part in transition planning also were more likely to complete post-secondary education than those who had not. For those students, successful transition strategies incorporated LD awareness and included informing students about their disability and ways to compensate. These transition strategies focused on teaching students to be aware of their academic strengths and weaknesses and making them knowledgeable about appropriate

accommodations, as well as emphasizing the need to self-advocate successfully by refining communication and social skills.

Government protocol in Canada and the United States identifies transition planning steps that include student participation in the creation of their Individual Education Plan (IEP). In Ontario, identified students may or may not be involved in the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) and IEP meetings (Fullarton, 2006). Participation in these steps fulfills the aim of aiding their understanding of their disability and services offered and it assists them in self-advocacy (Milsom & Hartley, 2005). However, researchers have found that some students who have LD have difficulty adjusting in post-secondary institutions due to inadequate transitions skills (Harris & Robertson, 2001) leaving them unable to complete their programs (Mull, Sitlington, & Alper, 2001). Cawthorn and Cole (2010) point out obstacles to the transition process. Their quantitative study used 110 participants with LD at selected universities and asked questions regarding, accommodations use, opportunities/barriers faced during transition, knowledge students had regarding their disability and available services, and self-advocacy strategies. The findings showed that students were not aware of the extra services that they could have accessed and instead only sought the same resources used in secondary school, unaware that the university could offer more assistance. Perhaps students with LD are not given information as to what services are available to them. Several studies find that students are often not invited to share in the IEP process (Williams & O'Leary, 2001). As well, if invited, students do not tend to be actively involved in the meetings. In a study done in the United States, Martin, Van Dycke, Christensen, Greene, Gardner and Lovett (2006) observed 130 secondary students during the IEP meeting and discovered that if students attend their IEP meetings, they talk for only 3% of the meeting time. As a result, students expressed a feeling of being "lost" in the meetings and did not gain an understanding of their diagnosis or the possible services (Martin et al, 2006). Likewise, Janiga and Costenbader (2002) surveyed special services coordinators at 74 colleges and universities in New York state and discovered that college administrators found their identified students to be unprepared for the college setting. These researchers also found that students a) lacked self-advocacy skills; b) were unprepared for larger class sizes, instructional time, teaching, and exam methods; c) lacked understanding of their strengths and weaknesses and the accommodations they required; d) relied heavily on parents and special educators; and e) their assessments lacked information about specific accommodations.

Schreiner (2007) found that students' understanding of their IEP goes only as far as the accommodations that they receive while in school and that most students have no recollection of ever reading their IEP to know what services they are entitled to. Moreover, Cummings, Maddux, and Casey (2000) reported that students tend to communicate poorly with colleges and universities concerning their needs, strengths, and weaknesses, and therefore are not effective advocates once they reach the post-secondary level (Cummings et al.).

Moreover, Murray, Flannery, and Wren (2008) indicated that the problem of transition planning is occurring not only in secondary schools and is not just a concern for students who have disabilities. In surveying 70 faculty members at universities and college institutions in the United States, they report inadequacies in the post-secondary institutions ability to provide services. These deficiencies come from the insufficient knowledge on the part of professors and administrators in terms of disability law, limited understanding of how to accommodate for individuals who have disabilities, and a fractured working relationship with disability services on campus. As well, Kurth and Mellard (2002) showed that students feel inadequately supported by faculty when it comes to asking for accommodations; therefore, many do not inform faculty of their disability or seek out assistance when needing accommodations. This finding was interesting in that, while students' perception is that colleges and universities have limited resources in providing supports, many researchers have found that more supports exist in tertiary education than in secondary schools. Cawthorn and Cole (2010) corroborated this result and found that universities and colleges tend to provide students with similar or more accommodations than they received in high school. In their analysis, they reported that students who have LD are offered "a menu of options based on their disability and more specific educationally focused accommodations" (p. 122) were offered in post-secondary institutions. The authors also make the point that at the college and university level, students may utilize more effective services out of greater need because of the demands of the coursework.

Many students chose not to disclose their disability and several authors noted that reasons for not taking advantage of accommodations range from not knowing how to receive accommodations to being embarrassed about having a disability, and trying to be successful without using them (Briel & Getzel, 2001; Sowers & Smith, 2003). Briel and Getzel (2001) conducted a descriptive research study following 25 students who had disabilities in job shadowing activities. These authors noted, "Although many college students with disabilities

understand how their disabilities impact their learning in education, a large number of students are unable to explain how their disabilities could affect them on the job” (p. 2). Another issue in the preparation of students for post-school opportunities is the limited career guidance and experiences available to them in secondary school. Having few career-development activities and little or no meaningful work experience may result in difficulties when deciding on a career path. Furthermore, Getzel, McManus, and Briel (2004) recruited 26 university and college students to explore a “supported-education program” for students with disabilities implemented once students entered post-secondary education. Results of this program were encouraging. Students were instructed in the development of learning routines, organizational strategies, role-playing, stress management, and self-advocacy skills. After the training they indicated a better understanding of their learning needs and disability and found career exploration activities to be useful in directing them toward identifying career goals.

The supports and opportunities that a post-secondary institution can offer to students who have LD are encouraging, but some researchers are discovering that many students with LD will not be afforded the chance to take advantage of them. A study by Milsom and Hartley (2005) reviewed 46 studies concerning student knowledge and skill areas as well as school counselor roles in the implementation of postsecondary transition planning showed that many students who have LD are not being encouraged in secondary school to pursue a college or university education; instead, many are being encouraged to attend vocational education. In their analysis they discovered that “only 13% of students with learning disabilities (compared to 53% of students in the general population) have attended a four-year post-secondary school program within two years of leaving high school” (National Longitudinal Transition Study, 1994, as cited in National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2004, p. 1). Hitchings, Luzzo, Ristow, Horvath, Retish, and Tanners (2001) used qualitative methods to examine career development and disability knowledge of 97 students at three universities in America and found that very few students with LD meet with their counsellors in secondary school to discuss transition planning. These authors also found that a significant percentage of their sample population – 20% – were discouraged from pursuing higher education by their teachers and school counsellors. Likewise Milson (2002) found that only 68% of secondary school counsellors played a role in transition planning for students with disabilities. Milsom and Hartley (2005) make the point that “successful transition to college opens the door for future economic success, social power, and

personal well-being” (p. 437) and concur with Dickinson and Verbeek (2002) on the notion that individuals who have learning disabilities are often employed in low-paying jobs with few benefits and little job security. Perhaps encouraging students with LD to attend higher education will lead them to a more stable, fulfilling career (Milsom and Hartley, 2005). Dickinson and Verbeek (2002) study compared employment and wage figures for 97 college graduates previously diagnosed with learning disabilities (LD) and 1,130 comparison adults. Results suggest that secondary school counsellors need to play a much larger role in assisting students with LD through the transition process. They focus on the following four goals to strengthen the support that counsellors can give:

1. knowledge of disability, understanding that school counsellors are not experts in special education but underlining the importance of collaboration with special education teachers to assist students in understanding their strengths and working within them. As well, the counsellor has a significant role in helping students to choose appropriate courses that can lead them to a higher learning institution.
2. knowledge of post-secondary support services, counsellors need to inform students of support services available in post-secondary institutions, and serve as liaisons helping students to connect to disability service.
3. knowledge of disability legislation, informing students that at the post-secondary level they can acquire services as long as they ask for them. Therefore students need to know what the laws are and what they are entitled to.
4. equipping students with the ability to self-advocate, involving opportunities for students to role-play and to exercise self-advocacy skills within their secondary schools to help prepare them for this role in their higher learning institutions.

If properly taught, students who have learned to self-advocate relish this role because they learn that they have control over their education and post-school outcomes.

In another study, Chiba and Low (2007) examined the responses of 68 participants concerning the effectiveness of a transition program to help students adjust to the university environment. Results showed that the program was useful for students in a few ways. First, the program allowed students to discuss their LD and ask questions, and they created an environment of peer support and the formation of a peer group. Second, the program enhanced the students’ ability to understand their LD in talking about their learning problems with friends;

the support led to the process of acceptance. Higgins, Raskind, Goldberg, and Herman (2000) focused on the importance of acceptance of the label *LD* as inherent in allowing individuals to be successful. Chiba and Low (2007) note that, prior to the transition program, students did not feel that they had a supportive peer group in terms of one that could help them develop coping skills. However, meeting peers who also had learning problems gave students an opportunity to feel that they were not alone and helped them to develop better coping strategies that might lead to acceptance.

At least 70% of all new jobs in Canada require some form of post-secondary education ([www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca)). Therefore, in a quantitative Canadian study using 213 students, Fichten, Asuncion, Barile, Robillard, Fossey & Lamb (2003) make the point, “As we become increasingly reliant on the new knowledge-based economy, citizens with disabilities can have an unprecedented opportunity to fully participate in the social and economic life of Canada” (p. 3). Of students who have disabilities, 36.4% attend some type of post-secondary education, (Human Resources Development Canada, 2002). Statistics Canada reports that 11% of Canadians with disabilities graduate from university compared to 25% of those without disabilities, while the college completion rates are more on par for those with and without disabilities at about 20% (National Association of Disabled Students). Research has shown that graduates with a university education, rates of employment are higher and salary rates are comparable to the general population (Fawcett, 1996; [www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca)). Therefore, attaining higher education is a valuable asset that can provide some competitive advantage for individuals who have LD (Horn & Berktold, 1999). However, problems still exist once in the workplace. At the point when individuals with LD do enter the workforce after successful completion of post-secondary education, Holmes and Silvestri (2011) found that graduates struggle with the decision to disclose their LD to their employer. As well, these authors reported that individuals with LD who enter the workforce do not make use of career services and they prefer low-technology strategies that are non-invasive over technological accommodations in the workplace.

The above research demonstrates the importance of LD awareness and of appropriate transition planning that prepares students to self-advocate and to seek supports that will assist them in successful post-secondary education experiences. However several of these studies found that students are not adequately prepared to fulfill this role.

## **Transition to Employment**

The results of recent research show that youth who have disabilities have lower rates of employment than youth without disabilities. The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2, 2010) is the largest study in the United States that documented the experiences of a national sample of students who were 13 to 16 years of age in 2000 as they moved from secondary school into adult roles. They were 21 to 25 years old at the final data collection in 2009. Researchers who analyse these findings found that one to four years after high school, 57% of youth with disabilities are employed compared to 66% of youth without disabilities. Of all youth with disabilities those who have LD make up the majority of this population. Newman, Wagner, Cameto, and Knokey (2009) found that difference in employment outcomes was based on type of disability, gender, household income, and race/ethnicity. Additionally, the employment opportunities for individuals who have LD and who pursue employment without first pursuing post-secondary education are few (Newman et al., 2009). Limited employment opportunities contribute to lack of financial stability and lead to dependence on public government assistance programs (Lustig & Strauser, 2004; Newman et al., 2009). Therefore, transition planning should include strategies that stress career development. Lindstrom (2008) described career development as “the process of developing and refining career goals over time” (p.1). Szymanski, Enright, Hershenson, and Ettinger (2003) found that this process is multi-layered and includes input from the individual, family, school, and community. Johnson and Mellard, (2007) acknowledge that “adolescents with LD need employment planning and preparation that is specific to their learning needs, and require a support system that is less intense than supported employment but more explicit than typically used with proficient learners” (p. 3). Benz, Lindstrom, and Yovanoff (2000) looked at supports in secondary schools and found some active teachers who specialize in transitions offering students career-related activities such as vocational assessments, practice job interviews, and college visits among various post-school planning activities. The authors noted that one of the most important roles a teacher can play when facilitating transition is the role of mentor. Mentors can help students to complete secondary school, guide them through the exploration and decision-making process, and help them to build connections to the workplace (Izzo & Lamb, 2003).

Wagner and colleagues (2005) analyses of the NLTS-2 data found only 5% of youth with disabilities were employed after high school graduation and up to two years after graduation.

Many held jobs for a few months at a time before moving on to a new job or unemployment (Wagner et al., 2005). This research identified two barriers for these individuals: poor social skills with co-workers and a low level of advocacy on the job. Other researchers also suggest that direct instruction in the community to develop effective communication and social skills may be beneficial to students who will seek employment out of secondary school (Baska et al., 2003; Clark, 2005; Lindstrom & Skinner, 2003).

The results of competitive employment for youth with learning disabilities are comparable to individuals without disabilities. However, wages reflect the individual's lack of post-secondary education; individuals who have LD tend to earn lower wages than their non-disabled peers (Wagner et al., 2005). The low numbers of students with LD attending post-secondary education suggests that students who have LD are more often being transitioned from secondary school into the workforce instead of being directed toward pursuing further education. Students who make the choice to transition into the work force will need to be encouraged to pursue post-secondary training in order to gain new skills needed to attain higher-paying and more stable employment.

To understand the relationship between educational programs at the secondary school level and transition outcomes for students who have LD, many researchers look at a student's ability to graduate from secondary school and find competitive employment as a model of best practice (Benz, Lindstrom, Yovanoff, 2000; Wagner et al. 2005). In terms of what schools can do to facilitate the transition of students into competitive employment, several studies focus on the type of transition program available to students. One example of a transition program is the Youth Transition Program (YTP), developed in the United States for youth with disabilities at risk of dropping out of secondary school. The aim of this program is to provide career planning for youth through the development of academic, vocational, and independent living skills. The program assists students in finding paid job-training that may help them to secure full-time employment. For students with LD, being active in the YTP for more than one year and being able to hold at least two jobs while in the program were factors that contributed to the attainment of a secondary school diploma and competitive employment (Benz et al., 2000). In addition, other authors including Dunn (1996), Kohler (1993), and Mellard and Lancaster (2003) echoed the importance of work experiences that include: paid work experience, vocational training, interagency collaboration, experience developing social skills, and parental involvement as

indicators to facilitate successful employment outcomes (Benz et al., 2000). In terms of preparing students with LD who are interested in pursuing a job immediately out of secondary school, several studies emphasized the importance of school-to-work transition programs (Baer et al., 2003; Benz et al. 2000). The idea behind school-to-work transition programs are that students are shown how to identify career goals and build desired work skills that will help them find and maintain competitive employment. For students with LD who are not academically inclined, placement in school-to-work programs that lead to post-school employment and/or vocational training benefit the student. Ideally, the student will find success in these programs that will foster the development of workplace competencies that are transferable, social skills in an employment setting, and higher-order thinking skills.

In another qualitative study, Lindstrom, Doren, and Miksch (2011) looked at several case studies of successfully employed young adults with disabilities and found that family expectations, work experience during high school, and transition services worked together to lead students into employment or post-secondary training. Over 10 years these individuals were able to advance in their careers due to three factors: (a) enrolment in higher education or job training programs; (b) patterns of workplace participation; and (c) a set of personal attributes including self-efficacy, persistence, and coping skills. The authors noted that these individuals were able to gain financial independence but only after several years. Once out of secondary school, most participants worked in minimum-wage jobs and were able to make advancements in their jobs through continuing education, stable work experiences, determination, and persistence (Lindstrom et al., 2011). These researchers maintained that work experience, including multiple paid jobs, structured work placements in high school, and community work experience, was critical in helping these students to learn occupational skills and to develop a work ethic and sense of responsibility. The authors also made the point that, although these students experienced difficulty in academics, they were successful in the workplace by finding jobs that suited their strengths and because the wages offered a tangible reward for their efforts. These factors contributed to their ability to become self-sufficient (2011).

## **Summary**

In terms of the post-school outcomes for individuals who have LD, their outcomes for competitive employment are lower than the general population. Students who have LD are attending post-secondary education in smaller numbers and therefore are not in a qualified

position to compete for higher wage occupations. Those who do attend post-secondary education had supportive school programs. Guidance from parents, teachers, and counsellors, paired with appropriate academic programs influenced this transition.

The following topics gender, family and individual characteristics reflect themes that relate to individual characteristics which influence outcomes for adolescents with LD.

### **Gender**

Much research has shown that women with LD who are employed tend to work in low-status occupations, earn low wages, receive few or no benefits, and have little opportunity for career advancement. They also do not attend post-secondary education at an equivalent rate as their male counterparts (Benz, Yovanoff & Doren, 1997; Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Lindstrom & Benz, 2002; Lindstrom et al. 2007). However, results from the NTL-2 showed more encouraging results: females with LD were just as likely to be engaged in employment and educational opportunities as their male counterparts (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, & Garza, 2006). The results of these studies also showed that, although more females were attending college, they were enrolling in two-year programs while more of their male counterparts are enrolling in two- or four-year college programs. As well, only one-third of women with LD earned minimum wage or more as compared to one-half of males with LD (Hogansen, Powers, Greenen, Gil-Kashiwabara, Powers, 2008). This means that two-thirds of women who have LD are earning less than minimum wage. Some of this difference may be attributed to the fact that females with disabilities more often pursue motherhood directly out of secondary school compared to females without disabilities and would, therefore, work fewer hours or not earn a wage (Levine & Edgar, 1995; Lindstrom, Doren & Miesch, 2011). A link exists between early motherhood and poverty, as well as between single motherhood and poverty (Berthoud & Robinson, 2003). Females with disabilities who belong to minority groups have been shown to be especially at risk for non-completion of secondary school, early motherhood, and poverty (Trainor, 2007). Effective transition-planning services for females in secondary school could be vital in reducing the increasing situation of women and children living in poverty (Trainor, 2007).

Low socio-economic status and having parents who did not graduate from secondary school are conditions that increase the likelihood that the children who come from these families will also not persist in secondary school (Alexander, Entwistle, & Kabbani, 2001). However,

young women with LD who demonstrated high levels of personal determination and motivation were more likely to achieve self-identified career goals (Lindstrom & Benz, 2002). Lindstrom, Doren, Metheny, Johnson, and Zane (2007) investigated the career development process for young women with learning disabilities through multiple case studies. The findings of this qualitative study uncovered three distinct phases of career development: unsettled, exploratory, and focused. Researchers looked at how females identified career goals and the stability of their employment. The largest influences on the success of their employment included (a) a high level of individual motivation and personal determination, (b) family support and advocacy, (c) opportunities for career exploration, (d) vocational training through either on-the-job training or post-secondary programs, and (e) supportive workplace environments. Women who had the most success were part of the focused group and, unlike the women in the unsettled group, their family members supported them by setting high expectations for their achievement, advocating on their behalf, and mentoring them. In the workplace, these women experienced flexibility and on-the-job training from their employers. In another study, Lindstrom et al. (2011) used a case study methodology to examine the career development process and post school employment outcomes for a sample of individuals with disabilities who were working 7 to 10 years after exiting high school. With a sample size of eight, the researchers found that women who were supported by immediate and extended family members, through holding high expectations of their employment and education, and by providing advocacy and support beyond the secondary school years contributed to the higher levels of motivation, determination, and self-efficacy within the females. As well, the recent study of Davidson, Denney, Baer and Flexer (2011) found more optimistic outcomes for females. While many males who have LD are being encouraged to pursue traditional trade jobs, females with LD are attending post-secondary education at higher rates than their male counterparts (Murray, Linden, Kendall, 2011). These results are consistent with other recent research by Coutinho, Oswald, and Best (2006). This information is encouraging because research has shown that high expectations lead to higher academic achievement (Wagner et al., 2005). However, other studies have examined female perceptions of their special education program and found that females perceive their teachers to give more attention to males in the program (Hogansen et al. 2008). Furthermore, expectations from family members and teachers tend to be less optimistic than the goals and aspirations that female

students have for themselves (Baer et al., 2003; Newman et al., 2005; Reis, Neu & McGuire, 1997).

### **Summary**

In terms of gender, traditionally females who have LD have been under paid and under employed compared to their male counterparts. Current research continues to find this trend. However, some studies have found that more females who have LD are setting high expectations for their education and are pursuing post-secondary education at higher rates than males with LD. High expectations from family members and teachers can influence the aspirations that females have for themselves.

### **Family**

Several studies have shown that high expectations in the home and community will lead to high achievement and goal setting by the student (Baer, et al., 2003; Reis, Neu & McGuire, 1997; Wagner et al. 2005). Specifically, the expectations that parents have for the educational pursuits or employment opportunities for their adolescent children “help shape students’ attitude and behaviours toward their schooling” (Wagner et al., 2005, p. 2). Parents who have high expectations also tend to provide financial and emotional support, as well as the advocacy needed to help their adolescent achieve those expectations. All of which encourage the student to work harder to set and attain reachable goals (Wagner et al.). For example, when parents were interviewed about whether or not their adolescent with LD would graduate from high school, go to a post-secondary institution, and/or obtain a competitive job out of secondary school, the parents who believed their adolescent “definitely would not” achieve those things had the highest percentage of adolescents who did not achieve post-secondary employment or education. They also had the highest percentage of adolescents who exited from high school early (Wagner et al.). In contrast, those parents who said that their adolescent child “definitely will” finish high school, go to a post-secondary institution, and/or obtain a competitive job out of secondary school had the highest percentage of adolescents who did meet their parents’ expectations. The authors attributed this finding to the parents and the adolescents sharing the same view of the transition goals required to achieve an end result. Unfortunately, only 61% of parents who have an adolescent with LD expect them to attend post-secondary education, compared to 92% of parents of adolescents without disabilities. Even fewer, only 33% of adolescents with LD, were expected by their parents to attend a four-year college program, compared to 88% of those without

disabilities (Newman et al., 2005). There are reasons why some parents hold high expectations of education and employment opportunities for their children and why others do not. In many cases, parents who expect their child to achieve a higher education do so because they themselves have pursued a higher education and have imparted that value on to their children (Newman). With the experience of having attended post-secondary education, these parents facilitated the process by helping with applications, planning an educational program, and taking campus tours with their adolescents (Newman et al.). Parents' expectations tended to reflect the way their adolescent left high school. If the adolescent dropped out of high school parents had expressed less optimism about his or her ability to complete a post-secondary program. However, if the adolescent graduated, the parents were more likely to have been optimistic about the educational goals for him or her (Newman et al., Wagner, et al., 2005).

A Canadian study by Whitley, Lupart and Beran (2007) drew information from Canadian statistics using the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) (n = 4310) and compared demographic characteristics, social, and school experiences of students with and without LD in Canada. These researchers found though the demographics of the two groups were similar, parents and teachers of the students with LD had lower aspirations for them than for the group without LD. Moreover, teachers perceived that the parents of students with LD were less involved in their education and students with LD put less effort into their studies.

Several researchers have found that expectations from family members and the greater community may also determine the path that a student will take (Baer et al. 2003). Another Canadian qualitative study by Fullarton (2006) using four case studies, the researcher found that students who were able to transition from secondary school to post-secondary education, be successful in their studies, and graduate had at least one strong parental advocate or a role model who helped them to develop characteristics of self-determination, persistence, goal setting, control taking, and the desire to prove themselves. However, another qualitative Canadian study by Litner, Mann-Feder and Guerard (2005) could not conclude that family support or an intact family played a significant role in student outcomes. Although the participants in their study were successful in their ability to graduate from post-secondary education, these participants experienced little support from their families. This lack of support was attributed to the majority of the participants having a late diagnosis of learning disability in adulthood, rather than in childhood or adolescence (Litner et al., 2005). If the student is without a diagnosis while in

school, family support systems can break down because of a lack of understanding of why the individual is having academic problems, and a lack of awareness and sensitivity of the learning problems. These participants found success by compensating for the lack of family support by developing a resilient attitude and by finding role models who supported them (Litner et al., 2005).

Adlerian research examines the effect of birth order on personality development (Adler, 1927). The first-born child, is showered with love and attention and might be considered the pioneer, settling the land for future siblings. When the second child emerges, the first becomes “dethroned” and feelings of inferiority may set in (Adler, 1927). To compensate for the feeling of inferiority, the elder child strives for power in the family and takes on the role of leader among his or her siblings (Adler, 1927). Characteristic of the second child’s personality is competition. They strive to keep up with the older sibling (Adler, 1927, Lundin, 1989). According to Adler, the last child is “pampered child” and runs the risk of becoming overly dependent on others. The only child, like the youngest, is also likely to be pampered and may become egocentric. Furthermore, they tend to be timid and dependent (Adler 1927; Lundin, 1989). In terms of sources of support, Salmon and Daly’s (1998) research found that first-born and last-born siblings were more likely to identify with parents and family as a source of support, while second-born siblings looked outside the family. These authors found that the middle child was not as close to the parents as the other two. They attribute it to the combination of first-born favoritism by parents and last-born freedom from competition from successors (Salmon & Daly).

### **Summary**

The above research demonstrates the importance of family support and advocacy in the transition planning of students who have LD. When parental expectations are high for educational achievement, the adolescents work to reach these high expectations. However many parents have low expectations of their children with LD. A resilient attitude and finding role models outside the family can influence these adolescents to aim for high post-secondary goals in terms of employment and high education.

### **Individual Characteristics**

In a study by Higgins, Raskind, Goldberg, and Herman (2002), the researchers uncovered one important aspect to highly successful individuals who have learning disabilities, is they have reached the stage of “acceptance” of their disability. They accept their weaknesses and work

toward their strengths by moving through stages that include awareness of their “differentness,” the labelling event, understanding/negotiating the label, compartmentalization, and transformation (Higgins et al.). The ability to place the disability into perspective and to look at it as a positive force in one’s life is how individuals who have reached the stage of acceptance feel about the disorder. To facilitate this process these individuals need to be supported in learning about the details of their disability and how to best maximize their strengths in order to cope with it.

Researchers looking into successful transitions to post-secondary education found self-determination to be an important factor that promoted success (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Field, Sarver and Shaw (2003) found that individuals with LD who exhibited the highest levels of self-determination were aware of their strengths and weaknesses, had an understanding of their LD, and were informed about specific services and accommodations that would help them to achieve success. Some strategies can be used to enhance individual characteristics, Skinner and Lindstrom (2003) synthesized research studies on transitions and itemized 10 strategies that contributed to successful transitions including teaching students to self-advocate; teaching coping strategies needed in post-secondary education, such as time management and organization skills; teaching students about their LD; showing them their psycho-educational assessment and explaining its meaning; and encouraging self-identification at their post-secondary institutions.

## **Summary**

Students who have disabilities have a multitude of challenges to overcome, from dealing with the stigma of “disability” to learning how to be successful while coping with one (Brown, 2008). Research involving individuals with LD showed that they are not attending post-secondary education or achieving competitive employment at similar rates to those in the general population (Newman, 2005; Wagner et al., 2005). Transition services have become mandatory in special education programs across Canada and the United States to help students plan for and achieve employment and post-secondary education goals (Benz Lindstrom Yovanoff, 2000; Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). Moreover, some research suggests that parental expectations can predict student outcomes (Wagner et al., 2005). Meanwhile a Canadian study found parental expectations did not have a significant effect on the transition goals of their participants (Litner,

Mann-Feder and Guerard, 2005). Therefore, looking into the roles that both the school and home have in transition planning will contribute to a better understating of this issue for adolescents.

In terms of preparing adolescents for transition, many studies highlighted the importance of effective school programming that include: programs that incorporate work experience, academic programs for those planning to attend university or college, and the ability to network with members of the community. Current research is focused on identifying successful transition strategies for adolescents with LD. Some researchers conclude their findings by stating the value in educating the adolescents to understand their strengths and weaknesses, gaining LD awareness, developing coping skills, and becoming knowledgeable about appropriate accommodations and how to self-advocate. Recent outcomes for females are encouraging; more females were enrolled in two-year school programs. However, this number was far less than females in the general population who were attending post-secondary education at rates higher than their male counterparts. Moreover, in the workplace, only one-third of females with LD earned minimum wage (Hogansen, Powers, Greenen, Gil-Kashiwabara, Powers, 2008). Some research suggest that adolescents with LD are receiving limited career guidance in secondary school and encourage school counsellors to take a more active role in educating these students (Dickinson and Verbeek; 2002).

### **Conceptual Framework**

Maxwell (2005) writes that when forming a research topic, the researcher needs to ask this question: What do you think is going on? A conceptual framework is “the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research.” (p. 5) As demonstrated through the literature review, individuals who have LD have poor outcomes with high secondary dropout rates, limited job opportunities, uneven employment histories, and low rates of post-secondary school attendance. Yet, in reality some students may have the intellectual ability to achieve successful post school outcomes in terms of employment and post-secondary education. These students should not be disadvantaged by their disability. However, some students are being transitioned into post-school options that do not reflect their intellectual potential. As a researcher I ask: Why are some students (who have learning disabilities) not able to live up to their intellectual potential? As demonstrated through the literature review, expectations have a large part to play in the outcomes of these individuals. The expectations that individuals have of themselves, as well as the expectations that family, school,

and communities have of them can influence their outcomes, both successful and unsuccessful (Wagner et al., 2005). Therefore, this study examined the relationships that individuals with LD have within the context of their family system. “The hopes and dreams for the future that parents share with their youth can often serve as a sort of marker or long-range target for post-school achievement” (Lindstrom, Doren, Metheny, Johnson, & Zane, 2007, p.4) Family members are instrumental in influencing the post-school goals of students who have LD (Wagner et al., 2005). Therefore, at the point of transitioning from secondary school to post-secondary education or employment, it would be interesting to find out how these decisions are made, “a child’s ability to learn . . . may depend no less on how he is taught than on the existence and nature of ties between the school and the home” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3).

This research project aimed to describe the lived experiences of adolescents who have LD as they made decisions about their transition out of secondary school and into post-secondary education or employment. The personal experiences of the adolescents who have LD, as well as the experiences of their family members during this transition process were examined. The researcher attempted to discover the role that each family member had in influencing the decisions made by the adolescent. The Ecology of Human Development (1979), provided the primary conceptual framework for this study and the Family Systems Theory (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997) provided the secondary one.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory of human development sought to explain how environmental contexts that surround a child help or hinder the child’s development. He defined development “as a lasting change in the way in which a person perceives and deals with his environment” (1979, p. 3). It is as if each individual is living within his or her own bubble, and environmental conditions permeate through this bubble to contribute to the development of the individual. “What matters for behaviour and development is the environment as it is perceived [by the individual] rather than as it may exist in “objective reality” (1979, p.4). Environmental conditions include relationships and interactions that individuals have with other people in their home environment, school environment, community, culture, and greater world. Bronfenbrenner’s theory is based on the premise that a reciprocal relationship exists between individuals and their ecological environments. In other words, the actions of one member in the environment impact the actions of another and so on (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

## **The Ecological Model of Human Development**

This theory began when Bronfenbrenner found fault with the lab setting in examining the development of humans and the idea that individual development could be observed in a separate, sterile, and solitary environment, away from the context of the true environment. As a remedy, Bronfenbrenner developed the ecological systems approach—the study of an individual within the broader systems that encompass him or her. Four systems make up the ecological model: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. These four systems are described below.

**Microsystem.** The most effective mode of analysis is to look at human behaviour and development in terms of system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). To discover what motivates the behaviour and development of a particular individual, that individual is best observed within a dyad. Dyads include the interaction between two people, also known as a two-person system. Instead of information being collected from one person in isolation, more is learned by studying both parties simultaneously because “if one member of the pair undergoes a process of development, the other does also” (p. 5). As Bronfenbrenner described, it is this relationship, the rippling effect of each interaction between two people or dyad, that creates a developmental path. In terms of human development, researchers look at a child and his or her interaction with the primary care givers, teachers, siblings, friends, and the community to understand changes in the child’s development. However, even a dyad cannot be examined in isolation.

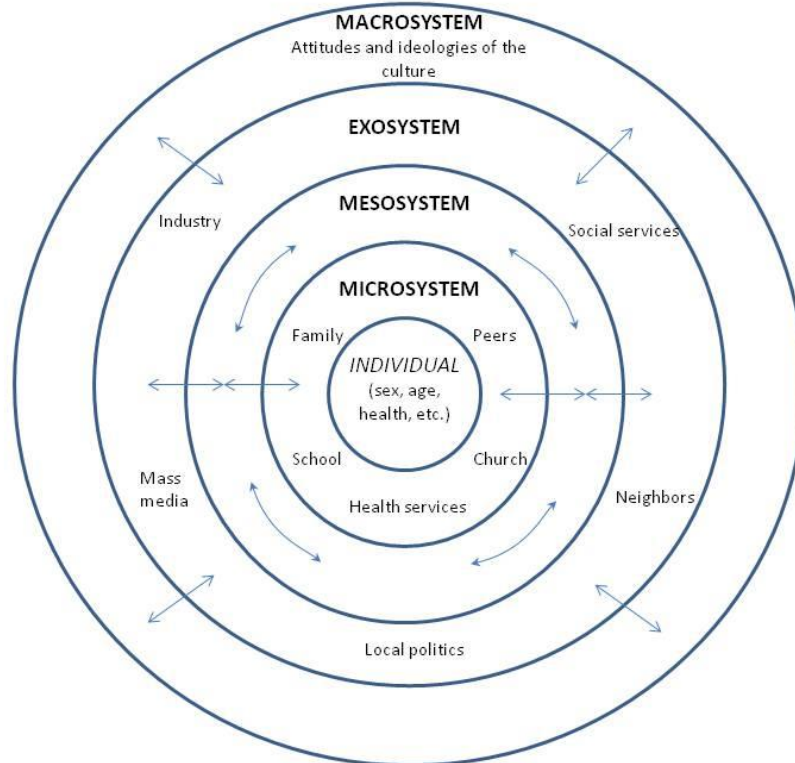
**Mesosystem.** The triadic principle recognized that the dyadic system, or interaction between just two people, is not sufficient and cannot be solely responsible for the development of humans. Third parties exist and impact the development of the child. For example, if a dyad included a mother/child interaction, the third party would include spouses, teachers, relatives, neighbours, co-workers and so on. The mesosystem is characterized by “the set of interrelations between two or more settings in which the developing child becomes an active participant” (p. 209). For some children, interrelated systems become those between the home and school environments. Once that child attends school, he or she is now a participant interacting in the activities of two different settings. As well, the child’s mother will act as a third party in the school setting, in communications with teachers about the child. All of which have a direct impact on the child.

**Exosystem.** The exosystem includes interactions that do not directly involve the child, but that do have an indirect influence on the child's development. For example, an argument between the child's mother and her spouse about finances does not directly include the child, but the stress of the interactions and the result of the interactions may have an impact of the development of the child. As well, the workplace of the mother often does not involve the child but events that happen to the mother in the workplace, such as working overtime, may have a direct impact on the child.

**Macrosystem.** The macrosystem refers to the social and cultural context within which individuals live. Bronfenbrenner (1979) makes the case that although cultures and subcultures are different with respect to values, beliefs, rules, and laws, they are also similar in the types of settings they contain, the kinds of settings that a person enters at successive stages of their lives, the content and organization of molar activities, role and relations found within each type of setting, and the extent and nature of connection existing between settings entered into or affecting the life of the developing person (p. 258). Cultural values shape what and how people do things; for example, if a culture values the education of its citizens, the people support this value by enacting government policies to fund universal education. The values, beliefs, and laws of a country, as well as the experiences of a child within this culture all work to impact that child's development.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) has cultivated all of these systems into a "set of nested structures . . . like a set of Russian dolls" (p. 3) that trickle down from the Macro- through the Exo-, Meso- and Micro- to permeate into the developing child. See Appendix C: *Figure 1*, for a model of this system.

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory



### Criticisms of the Ecological Systems Theory

One criticism of Bronfenbrenner's theory is that it does not include the genetic and biological components that may also influence an individual's development by focusing solely on environmental factors (Darling, 2007). However, recent analysis of this theory incorporate characteristics of the *individual* including all biological characteristics. Therefore this study includes a description of individual characteristics—genetic and otherwise—and incorporates these as factors in the analysis of findings. A second criticism of this theory is that it does not take into consideration the role of resiliency of the individual (Engler, 2007). Bronfenbrenner's theory does not include protective factors that are inherent in helping individuals adapt to changes in their environment. Incorporating resiliency and protective factors into this theory would allow for the social learning perspective that not all behaviour is genetic and/or learned but a combination of the two that incorporates individual autonomy (Engler, 2007). Although not explicit, Bronfenbrenner may have recognised the concept of resiliency and its importance in human development: "it [experience] radically expanded my awareness of the resilience, versatility, and promise of the species *Homo sapiens* as evidenced by its capacity to adapt to,

tolerate, and especially create the ecologies in which it lives and grows” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, preface, xiii).

### **Rationale for Using Ecological Systems Theory**

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory has been used extensively in research concerning individuals with disabilities and their families. His ecological theory suggests that development is explained in terms of relationships between people and their environments (Boyd & Bee, 2006). Because this study focused on family interactions, family roles, and the decision making process, this theory was thought to be a good fit. It enables the researcher to look at how each member of the family shared in the transition planning of the adolescent with LD. When looking at families under stress, Swick and Williams (2006) found that using Bronfenbrenner’s theory allowed the researcher to suspend judgement or to take sides because it is “inclusive of all of the systems in which families are enmeshed and because it reflects the dynamic nature of actual family relations (Garbarino, 1992, p. 1 As cited in Swick & William, 2006).” These researchers found that by including all family members in the data collection and by looking at the functions of a family through each member and their distinct roles within their family, one is able to gain a thorough understanding of family relationships in context which provides a richness to the research (Swick & Williams, 2007).

### **Family Systems Theory**

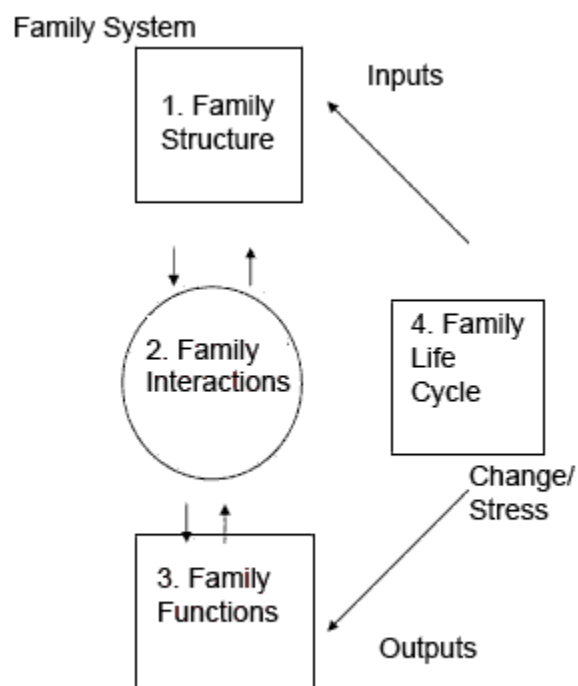
Family Systems Theory seeks to understand “what a family is and how it functions” (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997, p. 97). Four subsystems are used to describe the interaction between members: marital, parental, sibling, and extended family subsystems. Three assumptions are made in Family Systems Theory.

1. Characteristics such as having a family member with an LD provide input into the system. Their interactions with each other, their coping styles, and the roles that each member takes within their family system create outputs.
2. Family systems cannot be fully understood in part, such as a mother-child subsystem. True understanding comes from studying the family as a whole (Titelman, 2003).
3. Subsystems in the family are separated by boundaries between members of the family system as well as the outside world. These boundaries help to define member roles (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997).

There are four main areas of family systems theory.

1. Family characteristics provide the input into the system, these include: family size, form, and special challenges like poverty or disability.
2. Family interaction is the process component, including the roles, relationships, and communication among family members.
3. Family functions are regarded as the output of the family system. These include required responsibilities necessary to meet the needs of each member, such as, economic, social, physical, emotional and educational needs.
4. Family life cycle includes changes and transitions that happen to a family over time (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). (Appendix C)

*Figure 2: Model of Family Systems Theory*



Having a learning disability affects the individual as well as the members of his or her family (Dyson, 2003). Furthermore, the researcher explored sibling relationships through the lens of Adlerian ideas on birth order (Alder, 1927). Moreover, the researcher examined the perceived levels of power that birth order might have on family dynamics and the impact of birth order on personality development of the adolescent with LD (Lundin, 1989).

Bronfenbrenner's theory was used in this study to identify the context in which individuals with LD lived while they go through the process of transitioning from secondary school to employment or post-secondary education. The nest of systems—micro, meso, exo, macro—surrounding the individual gave an in-depth context to the individual's development as he or she engaged in the process of transitioning. Particularly, interactions with the individuals and his or her family members have provided the content for this study. Family systems theory complements the Ecology of Human Development in its premise that a change in one part of the family system has a rippling effect, evoking change in another part of the system (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). Three primary subsystems were the focus of this investigation: parental relationships, sibling relationships, and relationships between the family and the school.

The purpose of this research was to examine the educational experiences and perceptions that secondary school students diagnosed with LD and their family members have of their secondary school experiences as they engaged in the process of transitioning from secondary school to post-secondary education and employment. The effects of environmental conditions on the individuals, such as parental expectations, have been found to have the greatest impact on student outcomes (Baer et al., 2003; Fullarton, 2006; Reis, Neu & McGuire, 1997). Therefore, examining the interactions between the individual and his or her family is important in discovering the facilitators and barriers to successful transitions for students with LD.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to understand what decisions adolescents who have learning disabilities make regarding their post-secondary school employment and educational outcomes. Looking at these decisions as made through a process of interactions, Bronfenbrenner's systems theory as well as Turnbull and Turnbull's family systems theory was used to guide this research. The primary research question was as follows:

What are the experiences and expectations of students who have learning disabilities and their parents with regard to the transition process? The secondary questions were

1. What at the microsystem (adolescent-family/teachers) level impedes or facilitates successful transitions for student who have learning disabilities into post-secondary education or employment?

2. What at the mesosystem (interactions between student, school, and home) level impedes or facilitates successful transitions for students with learning disabilities into post-secondary education or employment?
3. What at the exosystem (triadic interactions) level impedes or facilitates successful transitions for students with learning disabilities into post-secondary education or employment?
4. What at the macrosystem (society) level impedes or facilitates successful transitions for students with learning disabilities into post-secondary education or employment?

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of research on the topic of learning disabilities, post school outcomes, transition programs, and employment and educational outcomes. The theoretical framework that guided this study was described. The following chapters detail the methodology used, including ethical considerations, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Following the methodology is a chapter of findings. A case study of each family is presented in narrative form. Each case study is structured according to Bronfennbrenner's (1979) systems theory as well as Turnbull and Turnbull's (1997) family systems theory. The roles and responsibilities of family members are discussed at the micro, meso, exo, and macro system levels, including characteristics of family functions and processes. There have been few Canadian studies that have presented the outcomes and/or transition experiences of student who have LD and who participated in transition planning while in secondary school. The findings of this study make a contribution to this field.

### **Chapter 3 - Methodology**

When seeking answers to the questions on how adolescents who have learning disabilities make decisions in terms of their transition from secondary school to post-secondary education or employment, it was important to gain access to all of the individuals involved in the decision making process. Understanding their experiences, values, and perspectives in terms of education and employment was an important factor in finding answers to the research questions. Hence, a qualitative approach was used to conduct this study. Qualitative studies allow the researcher to look in-depth at a particular phenomenon or event by focusing the research on fewer participants and by collecting large amounts of descriptive information (Maxwell, 2005). Qualitative research is an appropriate medium to describe a story; using narrative, from the voices of those who lived the experience being investigated (Mertens, 2005). As well, the activities involved in a qualitative research methods, such as data collection, data analysis, formation of research questions, and issues concerning trustworthiness are fluid and do “not begin from a predetermined starting point or proceed through a fixed sequence of steps, but involve interconnection and interaction among the different design components” (Maxwell, p.3). When designing qualitative research it is important to examine how each element in the design works, as progress is made through the research to make sure that the design is in fact leading to the goal of the research (Mertens, 2005).

Qualitative research methods are effective in investigating the lived experiences of individuals who have disabilities in order to gain a rich description of their circumstances (Creswell, 2009). This qualitative research was guided by a social constructivist framework and adopted a phenomenological approach. Under this framework the researcher was able to assess the meaning the participants made of their experiences (Creswell; Mertens, 2005). In terms of individuals who have learning disabilities, the phenomena of having a learning disability paired with the experience of transitioning from secondary school to post-secondary education or employment were described by the participants. The meaning of the experience as described by the participants was retold by the researcher. Therefore knowledge was co-created by the participant and the researcher who were both active in the data collection process.

A case study method was used in the design of this study. This method allowed for an understanding of a unique situation and its meaning for those involved (Creswell, 2009). The case study structure involves defining “the problem, the context, the issues and the lessons

learned” (p. 36). The problem identified in this particular study was the phenomenon of adolescents with learning disabilities who are transitioning out of secondary school and into post-secondary education or employment. The researcher attempted to understand how these decisions were made and who was involved in the decision making process. In order to do this, the researcher examined the environmental context in which the decisions about the adolescent’s future were made. To situate the context, all stakeholders in this decision process took part in the case study. Using multiple participants within each case study allowed for in-depth understanding of the context and the different issues that emerged for each family member during the transition process. This research took the form of a collective case study (Stake, 1995). Using multiple case studies allowed for a rich and descriptive cross-case analysis of the different transition experiences of these adolescents from Ontario. The researcher organised the original statements made by the participants in such a way that a narrative unfolded, telling a story that was the researchers’ interpretation of the participant experience. In the findings chapter the researcher included her reflections on the data collection process and in her interpretations of the data as the narratives were constructed. Reflections are important to state in a case study method where the researcher has a responsibility to tell each story while acknowledging bias. To accomplish this goal, the researcher openly stated in her writing what her personal experiences, reflections, and judgements were so that the reader is left to decipher for him/herself any bias in the findings (Creswell, 2009).

### **Social Constructivist Paradigm**

The social constructivist researcher creates an interpretation of what is real through his or her interactions with others (Kukla, 2000). Qualitative researchers ask questions to try to understand “what is the nature of reality?” and “what is the relationship between the inquirer and the known?” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.19). As well, they need to know the values of the researcher. Through this perspective, it is understood that knowledge and all learning is created through interactions with other individuals (Maxwell, 2005).

### **Researcher’s Perspective**

As a teacher seeing the struggles that children who have exceptionalities face academically, socially, and emotionally, I am very interested in the factors that facilitate success for these students. As a child, I was diagnosed with a learning disability and received early intervention and remediation throughout school. As well, I had a very supportive home

environment, with parents who had high expectations for my education and career. They also created a plan that helped me to achieve those goals. After spending the last ten years as a teacher and a researcher, talking to individuals, who have been identified with an exceptionality about their experiences, I find that many students who have been diagnosed with a learning disability set limits on what they can achieve. Yet, my own experience shows that with the right kind of support, from school and home, students can be successful academically. This research is personal for me because I have experienced the educational struggles that the participants recruited for this study have dealt with. I am seeking answers as to how individuals who have learning disabilities make decisions pertaining to their education and employment goals. I am specifically interested in how families, the school, and other factors influence the decisions of these individuals. I have chosen to present this research in third person and I switch to the “I” occasionally through the finding chapters and in the section on final thoughts to make the distinction between my opinions and my reporting of others opinions.

### **Ethical Considerations**

**Recruitment.** The proposal for this study was presented to the Learning Disabilities Association of Ottawa-Carleton (LDAOC) and the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO) to gain their approval and cooperation in supporting this research by circulating the recruitment notice. With that approval, the proposal was presented to the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Committee. Once the study was approved by the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Committee, the recruitment notice was sent to the LDAOC and the LDAO and it was posted on their websites (see Appendix D). Due to a low initial response rate, the recruitment notice was also posted on the disability services boards at local colleges and universities. It indicated the purpose of the study and the benefits to participants. Benefits included the opportunity to tell their story as a form of catharsis and to contribute to the limited body of research on this topic. Moreover, this research will lead to the development of an article on the facilitators and barriers to successful transition experiences with the aim of supporting parents and adolescents through this process. Interested individuals contacted the researcher to express their interest in participating. No pressure was put on individuals to participate. Participants had the choice of face-to-face interviews or telephone interviews and two of the five families choose face-to-face interviews, while the others opted to be interviewed over the telephone.

**Informed Consent.** All participants were mailed consent forms with a return envelope and stamp. In cases where participants were underage, forms of assent were signed by adolescents and consent forms were signed by parents. The consent forms outlined the participant's right to withdraw from the study at any time (see Appendix E).

**Confidentiality.** The researcher explained that participation would be completely anonymous and that pseudonyms would be used in place of all names in any reports or publications. Participants were given the option of having the consent forms read to them, and none of the participants in this study required that service. All of the consent forms were returned and signed by each participant. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. The transcript was sent to each participant for final approval.

**Data storage.** All research materials (interview tapes, transcripts, researchers journal) have been carefully organized and stored in a secure location and accessible only to the researcher and her supervisor.

### **Pilot Study**

Due to the lengthy interview protocol created for this study, the researcher thought it best to pilot the questionnaire and interview protocol with one family. The family consisted of five members, two parents and three children, one of the children being an adolescent diagnosed with a learning disability. The researcher conducted condensed interviews with each of the family members to gauge the appropriateness of the questionnaire and interview protocol. Redundant questions were eliminated or re-worded. The pilot study allowed me to focus the questions to make sure that they could provide answers to the research questions. It also allowed me to practise the interview process and to anticipate any questions that caused distress to the participants. After the pilot study was conducted, minor edits to the questionnaire and interview protocol were made. Data collected from the pilot study as well as any findings from it were not used in this larger study.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The data for this study were collected through one demographic questionnaire per family and a series of individual interviews conducted with a variety of family members per case study.

**Demographic questionnaire.** A questionnaire designed to elicit demographic information was mailed to each of the families and in all cases it was the mother who completed it. The questionnaire was effective in providing the researcher with preliminary background

information about the family before the interview sessions took place. It also gave the participants an understanding of what type of questions would be asked during the interviews. For a copy of the questionnaire refer to Appendix F.

**Interviewing.** In phenomenological interviewing, when looking for in-depth responses Seidman (2006) recommends conducting a three-interview series, stating that “people’s behaviour becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them” (Seidman, p.17). Seidman (2006) explains that one cannot truly gain access to a person’s perception of their experience in a “one shot interview”. Rather understanding comes from a series of three interviews. The first interview focus should be to “establish the context of the participants’ life experience” (p.17). The second interview is to “allow participants to reconstruct the details of their experience” (p.17) The third interview, allows the “participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them” (p.17). Seidman’s (2006) three-interview process was followed in this study. Once the interview series was completed with one participant, the researcher scheduled the next series with each of the family members in turn. All case studies were conducted at separate times so that the researcher would not confuse the data being collected and muddle the richness of the findings.

The socialization process happens as soon as we are born and therefore our early experiences help to define our future experiences (Murray, Linden, Kendall, 2012). When looking to understand how these participants made their decisions regarding transitioning, it was important to learn as much as possible about their family life experiences as well as their education. Following Seidman (2006), the first interview in the three-interview series had the focus of putting the participant’s life experience into context. Questions were semi-structured and required that participants recall early memories of their school experiences, social experiences, and relationships with family members. These data helped the researcher organize a timeline of experiences on which to elaborate in the second interview. The next interview focused on questions regarding present educational experiences, social experiences, and future plans. In the third interview, participants were asked to reflect on the meaning; which “requires that they look at their present experience in detail and within the context in which it occurs” (Seidman, p. 19). Questions were framed in such a way as to encourage reflection on the past interviews, such as, *given what you said about your career goals, what steps will you take during the transition process to ensure that those goals are met?* An adopted form of Mosak and

Shulman's (1988) Life Style Inventory was also used to learn more about the perceptions of siblings towards one another. This scale uses Adlerian ideas in interviewing siblings to discover how siblings perceive each other and see their role within the family. The data provided glimpses into other aspects influencing the adolescents with LD due to the perceived family position. The adapted inventory included 24 items for each sibling to rank the other as "most", "least", or "the same". Items included characteristics such as physical appearance, work ethic, and intelligence. Refer to Appendix G to see the interview protocol.

Participants were asked questions about the same themes, but the wording varied to account for the different roles they had within their families in relation to the adolescent. It was important to maintain similar questions particularly for the parent and the adolescent because sometimes only one person was able to provide detailed information. For example, in some cases the adolescent did not remember the process involved in obtaining a diagnosis, and it was important to ask the parent to describe it. In three cases, the parent was able to recount the process, whereas the adolescent either had no memory or was only able to offer minimal information. The primary participants for this study included the adolescent diagnosis with LD and his or her primary caregiver. It became evident that though all family members could provide data to understand the context, it would be unrealistic and unnecessary to use the three-interview series to interview each family member. Problems would occur in recruiting participants due to the large time commitment. As well, the primary participants, in each case the adolescent with LD and the mother, had the most experience with the topic under examination. Secondary participants, such as fathers and siblings, were very helpful in providing contextual information about family interactions and relationships but were far less informed of the details of school experience, transition planning, and future goals. Therefore, the primary participants in each case study participated in three 90 minute interviews following Seidman's three-interview series including separate interviews concerning, life history, present experiences, and meaning. Each interview was held at least one week apart from the last to allow for reflection. The secondary participants were interviewed on one occasion and were asked questions in line with Seidman's structure regarding questions related to, past school experience, current family relationships and future plans. Seidman (2006) recognises that sometimes "alternatives to the structure and process" (p. 22) of the interview series is necessary in order to make the data collection process feasible. In a few instances the interviewer made modifications to the

interview protocol based on feasibility to accommodate the participant's schedules, such as spreading the three interview sessions over two sessions to reduce participant burnout. This was important in cases where adolescents were reluctant to give their time to the interview process. Through the use of Seidman's three interview series, and the participants' verification of the transcripts, as well as the demographic data collected through the questionnaire, and my own personal reflections made during the interview process, multiple sources of data provided corroborating evidence that triangulated the research findings (Creswell, 2009).

### **Participants**

To gain a rich understanding of the transition experience of adolescents who have learning disabilities, each adolescent's experience was examined within his or her environmental context following Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. The participants in this study included: a) adolescents, b) parents, and c) siblings. The selection criteria included: a) adolescents diagnosed with a learning disability b) who are in the process of or who have recently transitioned out of secondary school and into post-secondary education or employment, c) and Anglophones who have been educated within Ontario and who have received special education services while in secondary school.

Five families agreed to participate in the study. In three cases the adolescent with a diagnosis of LD was female and in the other two they were male. Although statistically more males are diagnosed with LD than females, there were more females than males in this study. Family members were interviewed to add more depth to questions concerning early school experiences, the assessment and identification process, relationships with teachers, school administration, and peers. As well, their perspectives were important to gain a sense of the family values and belief systems regarding education and employment. In all five case studies the mother had been the primary caregiver who managed the majority of school related activities for the family. She had the most information to share on each of the above topics. Where possible both parents were interviewed, and in this study, three fathers agreed to participate in interviews. However, in two cases family relationships were so strained that either the adolescent or the mother did not want the father involved in the study. Siblings were also invited to participate in an interview. Feedback from siblings was important to triangulate the experiences that were occurring in the home. The mothers in each family agreed to answer a questionnaire, which were useful in gaining demographic data to acquaint the researcher with the

family before the interview process took place. It offered the researcher an overview of the family make-up and brief description of experiences, allowing her to probe deeper into understanding these experiences during the interview process.

Pseudonyms were used to disguise names and places in order to protect the identity of the participants. Each family was named after a specific bird – each of the birds chosen are ones that the researcher thinks of warmly, as beautiful and interesting. The quotes were chosen because the researcher felt they reflected symbolically the characteristics of the family in the context of the story told. I chose the symbol of the bird to represent the process of transitioning as “a bird in flight”. Northern birds fly south for the winter, and a bird in flight is following a preset path based on instinct. This path is different for every bird: larger birds can fly higher and go further distances than smaller birds. Like birds, the families in this study are also following a path and are using their instincts to navigate it. Each family uses different methods and resources along their journey. These will be explored thoroughly in the findings chapter. In the following paragraphs I will briefly describe the families.

**Heron Family.** All five members of this family participated in telephone interviews. Audrey and Alice participated in three semi-structured interviews on three separate occasions, while Alice’s father sisters participated in one interview each, on separate occasions. Alice was 17 years old and in Grade 11 at the time of the interview. She was diagnosed at the age of 8 years with a learning disability which included severe deficits in communication. She also has a speech impediment and Central Auditory Processing Disorder (CAPD). Her mother Audrey was her primary caregiver and her strongest advocate. Oliver was Alice’s father and was supportive in secondary ways, such as providing financial support. Neither Audrey nor Oliver attended a post-secondary institution. Oliver worked at many different jobs involving manual labour. Audrey stayed at home to care for her children for several years and recently gained employment through the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), where she did secretarial work in an office. Alice had two older sisters: Jane 20 years and Beth 18 years. Both girls were attending college programs and Alice wanted to follow in their footsteps by attending college too. The family is a close knit unit.

**Robin Family.** Three members of this family participated in semi-structured telephone interviews. Laura and Fiona, were interviewed individually on three separate occasions and Tom was interview once. Laura’s sister Violet did not participate. Laura was a 19 year old student in

her first year of university at the time of the interview. She was born in Ukraine and immigrated to Canada when she was five years old, along with her parents Fiona and Tom and her sister Violet. As an immigrant, Laura described herself as an outsider who took keenly to her academics in order to fit in. Laura was considered to be a gifted student until the stress of working so hard caused her to “snap”. Her learning disability was discovered late, in Grade 10 after she had been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder and began to talk about suicide. Laura contacted me after seeing the recruitment notice for this study. She was very eager to participate, in part to learn more about her disability and also to tell her unique story. Laura’s parents both have university degrees and they expected her to achieve high marks and attend university. Violet, 17 years, did not choose to participate in this study.

**Sparrow Family.** This family requested face-to-face interview sessions. I met Donna and Darth in their home each on three separate occasions. Darth’s father did not participate. Donna was a single mother and Darth was her only child at the time of the interviews. Donna felt that speaking face-to-face would allow for a more personal interaction. We arranged three meetings to conduct the interviews at her home. Donna had a master’s degree and did consulting work for the government. Her skills became obvious through in our interview sessions. She was a woman passionate about research and who knew where to go to find answers. Her home exhibited a mixture of items brought back from her travels around the world. Darth was 16 years old at the time of the interviews and he articulated his thoughts in a mature way. Both he and Donna had made plans together for Darth to pursue film studies at university. Darth asked if he could choose his pseudonym and wanted to be called Darth Vader, after one of his favourite fictional heroes. Donna asked that Darth’s father not be included in the interview process.

**Magpie Family.** This family of five members was interview face-to-face in their home. Grace and Vincent participated in three separate interview sessions and Vincent’s father and siblings participated in one session each. The Magpie family consisted of five members: Vincent, the adolescent diagnosed with LD, his mother Grace, his father Garrett, and two younger siblings, (Gwyneth 20 years and Alistair 18 years). Neither of Vincent’s parents attended post-secondary education. Garrett worked as a truck driver and Grace worked in a factory. Vincent would be the first in their family to go into an apprenticeship program, and he was training to become a diesel mechanic. This family opted to participate in face-to-face interviews. Each family member was interviewed one at a time and in person. Grace initially responded to my

recruitment notice and agreed to have her family participate. Vincent was 22 years at the time of the interviews. He was engaged to be married, had recently bought a house with his fiancé, and had a new job which kept him busy.

**Cardinal Family.** Three members of this family participated in semi-structured interview sessions. Mary and Eva were each interviewed on three separate occasions and Robert, her brother was interviewed once. Mary was 17 years old at the time of the interviews. She was diagnosed with LD in secondary school, and she struggled in her elementary school years with low self-esteem due to unexplained learning problems. Her mother Eva had become a support for her in the face of negative comments frequently made by her father and older brother. Mr. Cardinal did not participate in the interviews because Mary did not want her father's perspective to be heard. Eva had a university education and was a teacher. Mary's father dropped out of high school and worked for a railroad company as a labourer. Robert, her older brother by two years, did participate and was attending university at the time of the interviews. According to Mary, her diagnosis empowered her and it explained the inconsistencies between her strong work ethic and her poor performance in a few academic areas. She and her mother and brother participated in telephone interviews, the most convenient method given their work commitments. Mary's voice still resonates with me because of how confident, determined, and assertive it was. Not surprisingly, Mary was the one in her family to respond to my recruitment notice. She was looking to learn more about her LD and wanted to participate in anything that she could to empower individuals who have LD. A table of participants can be found in Appendix H.

### **Data Analysis**

The interviews for each case study were completed before the researcher began an analysis of the transcripts, Seidman (2006) recommends this process as a way to "avoid imposing meaning from one participant set of interview onto the next" (p. 113) The first step in breaking down the data was to read through each transcript and highlight chunks of statements that proved interesting and that were linked to the research questions. For this study, I was looking to tell a story about each adolescent within his or her family and school context. Hence, statements that contributed details to developing this story were selected and ordered in such a way that the reader could follow the story as a narrative of the family's experience, before, during, and where relevant after, the adolescent's transition. As Seidman (2006) points out, analysis starts at this point, when the researcher begins to make judgements about what

statements will be used to construct the meaning of the individual's experience. The benefit of forming a narrative or a profile of the participants studied is that it allows outside readers to look at large sections of raw material and to interpret the meaning for themselves. The profile is effective in presenting "the participant in context, to clarify his or her intentions, and to convey a sense of process and time" (p. 119) Each profile told the participant's story in sequence, beginning with early school experiences and ending with current and future plans. Once the profiles were created, the researcher looked for themes within each case and then created a table to compare each case study and search for common threads and patterns among the cases. The themes were created based on the ideas found in Turnbull and Turnbull's (1997) Family Systems Theory. They were organized into the headings of *family characteristics* (family, individual members, unique circumstances) and *family functions* (education, affection, self-esteem, daily care, socialization, recreation). Chunks of information were grouped according to Bronfenbrenner's nest of systems, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. At the microsystem level, patterns concerning the adolescents relationship with parents, siblings, peers, and teachers emerged. The mesosystem level, explores issues of advocacy and parental expectations. At the exosystem level, issues of family interactions, parents' life experiences, siblings personal experiences and their impact on the adolescents' ability to transition and vice versa arose. At the macrosystem level, themes of culture and communities, social class, and resources became apparent. Once these patterns and themes were identified across these systems, the researcher looked at the primary research questions to see how they answered them. Passages from the transcripts that seemed contradictory were put in one category that was kept in the foreground so as to remind the researcher not to force any pieces of information into incorrect categories. Embracing inconsistent information and describing the meaning that I interpret from it as the researcher will add to the richness of the analysis (Maxwell, 2005).

### **Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research trustworthiness criteria are employed to ensure that the researcher's findings are "rigorous", worthy of note, and useful to a broader population (Mertens, 2005). The four criteria of trustworthiness include: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Credibility.** Credibility is a criterion that ensures the research findings reflect the intended meaning of the participants (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Credibility was achieved

through member checks. All transcripts were sent to each participant for their approval of the content. The data collection process, using two phases of data collection, a questionnaire, and Seidman's three-interview series, enhanced the credibility of these findings. Several pieces of data were collected from 18 participants, over a span of 1-7 hours per person, giving a depth of richness to the phenomena under study. The interview series allowed the participants to reflect on their perceptions and experiences in each interview so that they could delve deeper into the phenomena under investigation. Each successive interview allowed participants to think about the meaning of their statements as reflected in the transcript, in order to add or clarify their statements in the next interview.

**Transferability.** Transferability is the degree to which findings from a study may be transferred to other situations, cases, or populations. In this study, transferability was achieved through the use of five in-depth case studies utilizing between two and five participants (Creswell, 2009). Using multiple case studies helped to identify like patterns among the experiences told. A rich description of the participants' perceptions, experiences, and the setting under investigation was described so that readers could determine for themselves whether these findings may be transferred based on shared characteristics (Creswell, 2009).

**Dependability.** Dependability ensured that the researcher used careful methods during the process of data collection and data analysis (Guba and Lincoln, 1985). Dependability was achieved through the use of an independent auditor -- a fellow PhD candidate, who took care in reading through the transcript statements, narratives, and final analysis to ensure that the researcher had stayed true to the origins of the data and to ensure that she followed the research methods indicated.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability ensures that the researcher has connected the research findings to the sources of original data (Guba and Lincoln, 1985). Confirmability was maintained by storing all copies of the audio-tapes, transcripts, consent forms, questionnaires, and all other artefacts for a period of 10 years.

### Summary

In summary, five families participated in this study and each family consisted of two to five members who shared their experiences through the interview process. Questionnaires and interview transcripts made up the data that were analysed and interpreted by the researcher. All interviews were transcribed and reviewed by the participants. The data were read and chunked in

to meaningful narratives to provide a context to each family experience. Themes emerged from the narratives and a cross-case analysis contributed further patterns that produced answers to the primary research questions. Trustworthiness was achieved by using member checks, having multiple case studies, enlisting an independent auditor, and protecting the artefacts by placing them in safe storage. This research was conducted to advance our understanding of the experiences of adolescents as they move through the process of transitioning out of secondary school and into post-secondary education or employment. The researcher strove to stay true to the words of the participants and used narratives to let the meaning unfold free of bias so that interpretation of the findings could emerge for the reader.

## Chapter 4 – Findings

In this chapter, the five case studies, including interview data from members in each of the five families is presented. The researcher has attempted to describe the experiences of the adolescent with LD during his or her transition process, from the point of view of the family. Furthermore, as the researcher active in co-creating understanding, my own reflections and observations are described through the case studies as I interpret the descriptions, tone of voice, and emotions that were present during the interview process. The purpose of this research was to examine the experiences and expectations of adolescents (who have LD) and their family members as they are engaged in the process of transitioning from high school to post-secondary education or employment. These case studies have been constructed to tell each story of the family, through a description of their experiences and perceptions of those experiences. The aim of this research is to gain insights about how adolescents who have LD make decisions regarding their transition and what factors influenced the decisions. Data collected from both the questionnaire and from each interview were used to construct the following narratives. The questionnaire was an important tool mailed to participants before the interview sessions took place. It provided the participants an idea of the questions the researcher would be asking during the interview sessions and it gave the researcher an introduction to the participants which helped to develop rapport quickly. Five families participated in this research study, including 18 participants who reflected on their perceptions of the transition experiences of the adolescent with LD.

Each case study will be told as a story: beginning with memories of when the families first became aware of the learning problems of the adolescent, followed by experiences and perceptions of the process of obtaining a diagnosis, then a detailed account of the educational experiences of the adolescent, and lastly, a description of plans for future education or employment. As these stages are described, they will be organized into elements of Bronfenbrenner's nested system of interactions. Following the five case studies is a cross-case analysis. Each of the five case studies will be analyzed in terms of reoccurring themes in the interactions at the micro, meso, exo, and macro levels. These themes will further be compartmentalized into elements of family systems theory, delving deeper into analysis of the roles, functions, interactions, and processes of the family during this transition.

At the microsystem level of analysis, elements of family systems theory including the input components of *family characteristics*: personal characteristics, characteristics of the family, characteristics of the disability, as well as *family functions*; including interactions effecting affection, self-esteem, economics, daily care, socialization, recreation and education. At the Mesosystem level, findings will be organized into categories of *family interactions*; parental, marital, sibling, and extended family relationships. At the exosystem and macrosystem level, findings will be organized according to *family interactions* as *changes in the family life cycle* take place. Due to the length and richness of the findings, I have organized the findings into separate chapters.

## **Heron Family**

It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.

C.S. Lewis

At the time of this interview, Alice was a 17-year-old girl in Grade 11 who had been diagnosed at the age of 8 with a learning disability that included severe deficits in communication. Alice also had a speech impediment and was diagnosed with Central Auditory Processing Disorder (CAPD). Alice was three and a half years old when she learned to talk. She had difficulty with her memory, pronunciation of words and sequencing. These problems became more evident once Alice started school as she fell behind learning to read and write.

Alice's family described her as quite, shy and socially awkward but with a gentle nature. She lived with her parents, Oliver and Audrey, and her two older sisters, Jane and Beth. It seemed to me that her shyness and reserved behaviour had not helped her to develop effective coping strategies—strategies needed to combat her various learning difficulties. Alice struggled socially, academically, and physically. As a young child, Alice experienced bladder reflux and underwent three operations between the ages of 4 and 8 to try to correct this problem. She continued to have difficulty with her kidneys. During our interview sessions, Alice's had few recollections of her school experiences. Furthermore, her ability to articulate these experiences was limited. To understand Alice and her school experiences, this study looked at her relationships with members of her immediate family to see how those relationships influenced and impacted her school experiences.

A theme running through conversations with Alice that I found was that she was a passive participant in her own education. During our interviews, Alice was unable to describe any specifics about her school experiences or her feelings about her school experiences and deferred those questions to her mother. It was not that Alice was uncooperative during the interview or unwilling to share personal experiences, as might be the case with some teenagers; it appeared to me that Alice was accustomed to having others speak and make decisions for her. Moreover, she was not included in the decision making process regarding her education. It seemed to me that she was unaware of the specific steps that had been taken to get her to the point where she was in her education. As well, it appeared that she was not sufficiently confident

in her own understanding of her education to articulate it. She would instead say “you will have to ask my mom about that” regarding any questions related to her education, diagnosis, and transition plan. Audrey, Alice’s mother provided the majority of the information used to describe Alice’s experiences. She described Alice as a girl who was “obedient and well mannered, who would never break a rule or disrespect her teachers.” Her mother described that Alice became more quiet and withdrawn as each year passed. She was a child who would not ask for help from teachers or from peers. Her mother related that she was too conscious of bringing attention to herself and to the fact that she had learning problems. Audrey said the problem with that was that “she is forgotten in the classroom and that has not helped her.”

**Social.** Alice’s early memories of her school experiences were positive ones. I asked, did you like kindergarten? She replied, “Yes, I played with my cousins”. So it seemed that Alice enjoyed Kindergarten because she had friends. The early elementary years would be her best because she had family members who acted as her social network. Her mother recalled: “She was always friends with her cousins and went to school with them so even though she didn’t make a lot of friends she always had her cousins to hang out with.” Audrey related that when the family moved, she no longer had a social network of family members and became more withdrawn. I could see from talking to Alice that social connections were important to her, but since she did not make a lot of friends after she moved it occurred to me, that she did not have the social skills to make friends on her own. This was also confirmed by family members. As Alice progressed through elementary school, the gap widened between her academic success and her social happiness. As her academic needs increased her social network decreased and her physical health became an issue. By the time Alice entered secondary school Audrey recalled, “I noticed the social thing. She wasn’t hanging out with her cousins anymore and she wasn’t talking to other kids anymore.” It seemed to me that Alice’s passive nature made it hard for her to connect socially with her peers. Her ability to create friendships was dependent on her family connections; without them she was not able to maintain her social network. Alice’s social isolation and unhappiness in school were further complicated by physical illness including, sore joints, viruses and infections. Each year got tougher with teachers who were unsympathetic to her absenteeism. Audrey related to me that Alice was experiencing depression. Audrey stated:

I am always taking her to different doctors and the doctors say there is nothing wrong with her and that she should go to school. . . . If I can’t get her out of bed, how can I

make her go to school?

Audrey believed that Alice's depression, anxiety, and social issues came from knowing that she was different from other children, and she firmly believed that Alice would have quit school if given the choice.

Outside her school environment, Alice enjoyed domestic hobbies, cooking, gardening, art projects and fan-fiction. She read and spent time with her sisters watching television and laughing. Jane said, "We always make jokes and we all have the same sense of humor so we get each other laughing." To understand Alice, it was necessary to examine her relationships with her mother, father, sisters, and her school and the influence that these relationships had on her experiences and goals.

### **Audrey and Alice**

In terms of the relationships in Alice's life, the one that she shared with her mother, Audrey, was the most influential. Over the years, Audrey had given Alice the most support socially, emotionally, academically, and financially. Alice reported:

She helps me with my homework when I am unsure of how to do it. She helps with school stuff besides homework and with the emotional stress that comes with it. It gets kind of hard sometimes when you have too much work to do.

Over the years, it seemed to me that Audrey acted as a persistent advocate for Alice. This began in Grade 1 when Audrey felt that there was "something very wrong here," yet she had trouble getting help from Alice's teachers to identify the problem. Audrey said:

They didn't seem willing to diagnose her with anything. . . . I kept saying to the teacher, "Have you seen another child like her?" The resource teacher replied "No, I have never seen another child like her. . . but don't worry we will pass her on to the next grade."

**School supports.** That encounter was the first to cause Audrey to mistrust the school system in terms of its ability to facilitate Alice's success. As Audrey put it, "I didn't want her to be passed on to the next grade. I wanted them to start to care about the fact that she wasn't learning." Audrey was not a parent who worried about the impact of labeling. She recognized that having the correct diagnosis for Alice was essential to get her the proper services and supports while in school. Audrey said, "I wanted her labeled. . . . These things run in families. . . . If you don't have a diagnosis, how can you help the next generation? So I wanted it." Having been identified with a learning disability herself at the age of 30, Audrey understood how

problematic it could be to go through school without a diagnosis. Audrey said about herself as a student, “I couldn’t understand how other kids could answer questions when I couldn’t get it. I started asking questions from my peers about how to do things so I learned to teach myself.” In childhood, without a diagnosis, Audrey learned to cope by using her peers. She used her social skills as a coping strategy to help her navigate through her schooling. It seemed to me that Alice had not developed this coping mechanism; instead she used *learned helplessness* to navigate her schooling. Alice would sit and wait for a teacher to ask her if she understood what she needed to do in terms of her school work. Audrey said, “I tell her teachers she is different. You have to go to her, to ask her, to draw her out. If you let her sit there and be in her own little world, she is happy with that.” Often Alice did not know what to do but she also did not want to draw attention to herself; so she sat quietly and got very little accomplished. Her mother said:

She is supposed to have modified work but they seem to give her all of the same stuff they give the other kids. So what I have been doing over the years is she just brings me the work that she gets done and I finish the stuff and hand it in for her.

It appeared to me that Audrey’s mistrust of Alice’s teachers and school administration may have been a factor in Alice’s tendency to use helplessness as a crutch. Audrey described her frustration with teachers and with the system:

As long as the IEP is in writing and they say they did give the accommodations and modifications on it, then they are good. They may not do the stuff on it but as long as it is signed by the parent that is all they care about.

Audrey described each year of Alice’s education as “getting harder”. Audrey’s perception was that teachers frequently refused her requests. She found advocating for Alice was exhausting and frustrating; furthermore, she believed that Alice would not have gotten any services without her asking for each and every one. If Audrey had not been heavily involved in working with Alice at home and if she had not taken the initiative to re-teach specific concepts to her, Audrey believed that Alice would not have learned to read. She said:

It is like they are saying, “We don’t care if she can’t read, we don’t care if she is upset, we don’t care that she is different than the other kids, we don’t care. We are just throwing her into the next grade. . . . It is someone else’s problem.”

Audrey thought that part of the reason why Alice got such poor support was that “her disability is hidden so her needs are ignored.” It appeared to me that these negative experiences and

interactions with the school led the family into an “us versus them” mentality. It seemed that Audrey advocated for Alice in a protective manner because she felt that the school was not playing fair; therefore, she felt the need to be the one to stand up for Alice. It occurred to me that one of the reasons that Alice coped by using helplessness is because it fit her mother’s style of advocacy. For example, Audrey gave Alice permission to write her own notes to excuse absence and sign her mother’s signature to get out of class when she felt ill. This practice was not acceptable her school furthermore, Audrey did not let the school know that she had given Alice this permission. Moreover, did not prepare Alice for the consequences of forging a signature. Audrey stated that the school secretary had telephoned her saying, “Your daughter is in big trouble—she has been sent to the Vice Principal.” Audrey’s responded, “No, you wait. I will go to the Vice Principal with her.” They did not wait for Audrey and suspended Alice. This experience sent Alice into a downward spiral; Audrey was unable to get Alice out of bed for several days.

With Alice’s social difficulties and with her health problems, home schooling with a tutor worked well for her. But this placement also came with its share of difficulties. At the same time that Alice was being home schooled in two of her four classes, she was enrolled at school in a Yearbook course. She attended the class for three days before she became ill. Audrey described:

She was upset and it was hard for me to get out of her the problem. Finally she said that she felt stupid because they wanted her to write articles and she said that she wasn’t getting help from the teacher.

Audrey described the push and pull game that she played with the school administration, when they met to discuss the difficulties Alice was having. In Audrey’s words, the Vice Principal “dumped her out of that class.” As a result, Alice was behind in credits and needed to take summer school classes to finish her year.

As Alice progressed through school, her services were reduced and she was unwilling to use the services that remained available. In secondary school, Alice no longer had access to an educational assistant (EA). Her diagnosis of LD gave her access to a computer and to the resource room; however, the physical location of the resource room, next to the main office and in view of all students, made Alice uncomfortable. Because Alice would not go to the resource room to use the equipment, the school asked Audrey to come in to sign the papers because they were returning the equipment. It appeared to me that the very supports that Alice should have

been able to rely on created boundaries. Audrey described Alice's resource teacher and her vice principal as unaccommodating. Audrey believed that the secondary school lacked help for students who had special needs: "It is the other children who don't self-advocate and who don't have the skills to ask for things who don't get the help, yet they are the ones who need the help the most." Audrey was frustrated by the unwritten rules about advocacy at the secondary school level: "I go and I advocate for her but they don't want to hear from me—they want her to tell them what she needs." Alice's hidden disability, paired with her quiet, withdrawn, and obedient nature, had let her go relatively unnoticed in the classroom.

Audrey also had difficulty with teachers and principals who passed judgment about Alice's absences. She described it as "playing games" with the secretary and teachers who would not give homework to Alice during days missed. Part of the reason why Alice had difficulty getting caught up was that, on a few occasions, her absences had caused the teacher to "make fun of her." The resulting discussion between Audrey and the principal led to Alice being dismissed from the classes. Audrey's perception was that "in high school any misunderstanding with a teacher can cause her to be dumped out of the class," resulting in Alice being home-schooled. With a doctor's approval, the school provided a teacher for Alice. The problem with what would have been an ideal learning environment for Alice was that, in home-schooling, she could take only two courses per semester.

In summary, it was Audrey who adapted to support Alice rather than Alice learning to cope successfully on her own. It seemed to me that Alice's coping mechanism was to withdraw from her educational experience, a situation that required Audrey to work twice as hard to make sure that Alice could graduate. It appeared to me that the role of advocate that Audrey took on for Alice as a child did not evolve in the ideal way (that is, advocacy turning into self-advocacy). Instead it turned into a protective role of sheltering Alice from all obstacles. This situation developed through the resistance that Audrey had experienced while advocating for Alice with school administration and teachers. Alice also had a role in this resistance in that she would not take on her own self-advocacy strategies.

### **Alice and Oliver**

It seemed to me that Oliver's role in Alice's education was an indirect one. When I asked about his involvement at different stages through Alice's education, he explained: "No, that was my wife; she is the stubborn one and she doesn't take 'no' for an answer. Alice would bring

homework home and my wife would help her.” Alice’s learning problems became obvious to Oliver when Alice was in Grade 1. When asked about his reaction to her diagnosis of LD, he exclaimed, “It was a relief.” Oliver also had a number of learning problems when he was in school. He said he could empathize with Alice:

I think that if you have been through it you have understanding of what other people go through. There are always the smart kids in class that sort of look at you and you feel left out, or you feel insecure, because you work at it and you still can’t get it.

Having had some experience with learning problems himself, Oliver was very sensitive to Alice and her needs. He said:

I wasn’t concerned about her label. Who cares about the label, as long as the kid is getting help and improving? As long as she gets help and she puts effort in and tries then I am happy with how she is doing.

Oliver described himself as the traditional patriarch and provider of the family. His role in his children’s education was limited because Audrey took on the role of advocate. However, I could see that Oliver’s role was very important in that he was there to provide Audrey with support, emotionally and financially when she asked for it. He also played an important role in that he offered support to Alice by joining her in hobbies and other activities unrelated to school. Beth, Alice’s sister, described their relationship: “They get along pretty well. They don’t talk a lot together but they do projects together, they build things together and think similar. She is interested in what he does.”

In summary, Oliver had an indirect influence on Alice’s education. He was there to support Audrey in every decision she made regarding Alice and her education. He also provided Alice with respite, interacting with her doing hobbies which gave her a break from her school work.

### **Sibling Interactions**

**Alice and Jane.** Jane, the oldest sister, had the role of protector in Alice’s elementary education: “My mom wanted me to look after her at school or on the playground.” Jane recounted the difficulty Alice had making friends of her own, “If she was alone, I would let her play with my friends.” She described Alice’s anti-social behaviour and the bullying Alice experienced through school: “I think it had to do with the LD.” Jane felt this way because neither she nor Beth had difficulty making friends and neither was bullied as Alice was. Over the years,

Jane's role as protector changed and some sibling rivalry set in. She said, "Alice gets the most attention. That has been a point of fights over the years." Jane indicated that by the time Alice was in Grade 3, she and Beth noticed the extra attention their sister was getting from their mother. Jane said of Alice: "She is a lot less social than me. I don't know why but she is the person I get along with least in this family. Since Alice was little, my mom has been her little protector." Alice's reliance on their mother's time and support was noticed by Jane and Beth and became a distancing factor in their relationship with Alice. Jane saw Alice as taking advantage of Audrey:

She sometimes plays dumb, "I don't know how to do it," and my mom will pretty much do everything for her even though Alice is capable of doing it herself. It probably sounds a bit mean but after living with Alice for so long you know she is perfectly capable of doing so many things but sometimes she just plays dumb and my mom will do half the stuff for her.

**Alice and Beth.** Beth was two years older than Alice. With respect to Alice's education, Beth remembered that Alice "had difficulty learning stuff compared to how me and Jane learned." She described Alice's learning as "slower, difficulty understanding, trouble in school, picked on, behind in homework, behind in grades, and gets bad grades." Beth's memories of Alice's early school experiences echoed Jane's memories, "Alice always seemed to have trouble in school."

Beth had a more hands-on role with Alice: she helped Alice with her school work, introduced her to an Anime club, and assisted Alice in finding a summer job. She said:

When Alice had a job at the pumpkin patch we worked together and I would try to give her pointers like how to do a job so it would be easier for her. We worked in a café—I worked cash and I would help her deal with customers. She only worked for maybe 2 or 3 weeks but it just didn't work out.

It seemed that Beth was a positive influence for Alice and was really kind to her. Alice's reading improved after Beth "got her hooked on fan-fiction." Beth also encouraged Alice to join some clubs, involvement that helped Alice develop some social skills. Beth said:

She went to a couple of Anime clubs at the public library and she was in a sewing club at school. In the Anime club, they watch movies and stuff, but she kind of stopped going after I stopped going. I got too old to go and busy with college.

Beth spent time with Alice at home watching science fiction movies. She recalled: “Alice is more like me in our interests and Jane is most like me in personality.”

### **Alice and School**

Alice was very concise in her descriptions of school experiences. When asked if school was a positive or negative place for her, she stated, “It is not really positive or negative. I don’t like loud noises in the hallways and sometimes in classrooms and sometimes I don’t like how crowded the hallways are.” As a researcher in the area of LD, this comment surprised me as being uncharacteristic of a concern that a student with LD would have. When asked about problems with peers or with teachers she replied, “No, not with peers or with teachers, I have some teachers who are very helpful.” Alice pointed out that her best years of school were when she had a teacher who was “really nice.” Based on Audrey’s comments, these teachers were rare; but, Audrey concurred that when Alice had a teacher who took the extra time to work with her, a teacher who was “nice,” one who showed approval of her, the school year went a lot smoother with less sickness.

Alice had limited self-awareness of her rights as a student. When asked about her Individual Education Plan (IEP) and transition goals, Alice showed that she was not well informed and she relied on her mother to navigate the school system. She was unaware of what her transition goals were and did not attend her IPRC meetings. It was clear to me that Alice had a very passive role in her own education. Transition planning was a secondary focus for Alice’s family. Alice herself did not have a clear plan for her future. She wanted to

go to college if I can, my sisters both go to college. Maybe pick up a couple of hobbies and possibly make some money off of them. I like art and I could learn new hobbies like pottery or jewellery making.

It appeared to me that Alice wanted to go to college because her sisters went and because she thought that was the expectation of her as well; but Alice was unaware that her school program—the essentials stream—would not allow her to transition to a college program.

### **Audrey and School**

It seemed to me that Audrey was Alice’s *only* advocate and she felt adversarial towards teachers whom she felt were not as accommodating as they could have been. In terms of advocating for Alice, Audrey was burnt out: “Everything is ‘No’ they won’t give me the help. Since she was little I have been fighting. I have to fight for everything she got.”

**Transition planning.** In terms of transition planning, even though Alice was in Grade 11, no one from the school discussed transition goals with Alice or her family members. Alice did not have a guidance counsellor assigned to her and did not participate in any type of vocational training or co-operative education experience. Audrey spoke frankly when she said, “My focus for right now is to see her graduate. We have some ideas for her future but for right now I have to focus on getting her a diploma.” When asked if Alice had a transition plan, Audrey replied, “No.” She went on to say that she had begun looking into college programs for Alice when she was in Grade 10. Audrey’s older daughters both attended college and Audrey planned to transition Alice into a college course. Audrey reported:

Alice wasn’t sure of what she wanted to do, so I went to the college to get some information on different programs. It was then that I was told from the office that my daughter needed certain prerequisite classes that she doesn’t have to get into college. Because Alice was enrolled in essentials classes, she did not have the prerequisite courses to enter college. The consequence of putting Alice into “essentials” classes had not been articulated to Audrey; she did not know what it would mean for Alice’s future. Audrey described the support from the school for a successful transition for Alice as non-existent: “The school isn’t talking to me about transition plans; they didn’t inform me that her program wouldn’t allow her to go to college.” Audrey was very frustrated that Alice’s academic program did not reflect the transitions goals that Alice or her family had. Alice was simply working on courses that would lead her to graduate but none that would lead her to post-secondary education or employment.

Audrey and Oliver did not have the information needed to make an informed choice for Alice when they were told that she could take essential courses. Audrey seemed defeated by this obstacle:

You have to look into college programs beforehand and go through the high school to make sure that your child is on the right track. If the high schools don’t tell you what you need to know to get your child into the right program in order to go to college, then your child won’t be going.

After Alice graduated from secondary school, both Audrey and Oliver hoped that she would be eligible to go into the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP):

If they will give her an allowance then I want to look into some sort of art class like pottery or something like that that she can take and then maybe I would help her set up a

studio and I would help her sell her art.

Audrey and Oliver agreed that Alice cannot live independently. Audrey indicated: “I still have to run her bath water for her because she can’t remember which tap is hot and which is cold.”

Audrey explained her experience with ODSP. It

helped me develop skills and find employment so we hope that they can do the same for her. As she gets older with her social problems, I am not sure how that will affect her employability. I know that she would need a really understanding employer.

### **Audrey and Alice’s Doctors**

Alice had seen several doctors over the years. As she did with Alice’s teachers, Audrey took on the role of communicating with her doctors. Because of Alice’s high absenteeism, Audrey was always chasing down doctor’s notes. Audrey found the majority of Alice’s doctors less than supportive of her situation:

Her doctor, he didn’t recognize her LD or anything when I tried to explain why Alice misses so much school and why she is anxious. They usually say, “There is nothing wrong with her and she needs to go to school.”

A year prior to the interview, Audrey found a new doctor. At their first meeting, the doctor asked Audrey if there was something wrong with Alice. Audrey responded, “I’ve been trying to tell the doctor for years, that there is something wrong with her but they didn’t listen to me.” From there, Audrey was able to tell this doctor about Alice’s health problems, her medications, and weak immune system. “I have taken her to a Naturopath to try to build up her immune system. Alice doesn’t eat certain foods because she doesn’t like the texture of certain foods. This is also a symptom of autism.” Finally Audrey had found an ally in the new doctor.

Audrey recalled one morning when “Alice wouldn’t get up in the morning. There was nothing I could do to wake her up.” The vice principal threatened to send a truant officer to their house to make Alice go to school. Audrey took her to the doctor and said, “I have had it. After all these years of dealing with the school, teachers, vice principals, I am tired of this.” The doctor sent a note to the principal to tell him to start treating Alice as a special needs child and to stop threatening me with the truant officer.

### **Audrey and Her Other Daughters**

Audrey explained that she tried to be fair with each of her girls. She admitted that Alice needed more of her time; “I have had comments—‘It’s all about her,’—‘It is all about her

health.’ Jane and Beth admitted that in the past they have been very jealous of the time their mother spent with Alice. Jane said, “With our mom, my and Beth’s relationship is probably more strained a bit. We got tons of attention but didn’t get as much attention as Alice did, so we have probably been jealous of that a bit.” Jane also said that, now that she was older, she understood why her mother gave more time to Alice. Both Jane and Beth said that they had a really good relationship with their mother: “We are so much alike, we are all stubborn so we bicker, but we really care about each other and we get along.”

### **Audrey and Oliver**

Both Audrey and Oliver were active in their daughters’ lives. Audrey was the caregiver; she managed their home, the girls’ schooling, and their emotional well-being. Oliver was the main financial supporter. He drove the girls to and from work and he spent quality time with each of them. He said, “I would do anything for any of my girls—whatever they need.” He also accommodated his wife in the same way: “My wife is smart. If she is stressed about Alice and her health, then I say, ‘What do you want to do?’ and I support her in whatever she wants.” He remarked that having a child with special needs “brings you closer together. My wife, we support each other in any decision made, for her school work and her sicknesses.”

### **Summary of Themes using Systems Theory**

In terms of Alice’s transition plans, her interactions within each ecological system—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem—have produced specific themes. These themes are detailed below.

### **Microsystem**

Alice’s different interactions within her family and school environment impacted her transition goals. Alice’s learning disability and her communication problems made going to school difficult. She spent most of her time alone while she was at school and then she spent a lot of time alone in her room when she was at home. Being at school made her feel anxious; this stress came out in tantrums, withdrawal from peers and family, illnesses. Alice became a passive participant in her own education. When asked about her role in setting goals for her future, she said, “It was my mom, teachers, and principal, maybe; I don’t go to my IPRC meetings. My mom just goes.” Throughout the interviews, the language used by participants focused on “taking care of” and “doing for” Alice without giving her a voice in the decision making process.

Alice’s mother was her strongest supporter and advocate. Audrey’s love and commitment

to her daughter was very touching to me and I had a lot of respect for her as a mother. However, it seemed to me that Audrey's advocacy efforts may have unintentionally contributed to Alice's learned helplessness behaviours. Audrey's constant involvement in every communication and decision might have been a contributing factor to Alice's passive participation throughout her schooling. Alice was not sure if she could go to college but said, "If I do go to college, I will need help from my sisters, my mother, and my teachers." The adjusting that each of Alice's family members had done to accommodate for her may have been one of the reasons why Alice had been unsuccessful in holding down a job and why she thought that a future employer would need to "adjust to" her learning disability. Alice's school experiences had been, at times, unsuccessful because when she would not adapt, her teachers had tended to let her go on "unnoticed" and under-served. She had never been asked to adjust or to adapt herself to her surroundings nor had her parents or school program given her any training or made it a priority to teach Alice these skills. It appeared to me that somewhere in the process of advocating for Alice, Audrey had given Alice the impression that in the "real world" others would need to adapt to accommodate for her needs.

Alice's other family members, her father and her two older sisters had taken a more indirect role in facilitating her transition. The oldest sister, Jane, had always been very protective of Alice. Jane admitted that she had always thought that Alice's learning disability was the reason why both parents wanted Alice to be taken care of by the girls. As they grew up, Jane expressed that she had become less understanding of Alice's needs. The middle sister, Beth, had been more patient with Alice and spent some quality time with her.

All three girls took a Life Style Inventory and interestingly all three perceived each other in similar ways. Jane was seen as the most attractive and sociable. Beth was considered to be the most organized and intelligent. Most interesting to me as the researcher was that Alice was perceived, even by herself, to exhibit less desirable characteristics such as being most withdrawn, demanding, stubborn, sensitive, spoiled and least intelligent. This perception of each sibling tied in with the role that each member had within the family and, in this case, was consistent with the Alice's role of being withdrawn and not fitting in with her sisters.

### **Mesosystem**

One central theme to this case study is the persistence of Audrey, Alice's mother, in working with the school to try to get the best services for Alice. Unfortunately, many of her

initiatives were rejected by school staff with a simple “No.” Audrey was the one person directly fighting for Alice, “I was always the one interpreting what she was going through. If she had a problem, I solved it for her. I listened to her. I have to be the one voice between her and her teachers.” When asked about the usefulness of the IEP, Audrey said that she was not really sure that it was being implemented. Audrey blamed school staff for Alice being put into the essentials stream but she did allow it without asking the question: How will this affect her transition plan? It appeared to me that these parents did not expect any level of responsibility from Alice in managing her own education was never mentioned as an issue. Protecting Alice and taking care of Alice had been central to their thoughts. Audrey stated: “She will always have to live at home. The doctor recommended a community home but she can live with us for the rest of her life—we don’t care.” Both Audrey and Oliver seemed to be trying to buffer her from any sort of change that might have caused her stress.

Audrey had as much trouble convincing doctors that there was more to the story with Alice as she had convincing Alice’s teachers. Alice was diagnosed in Grade 3 with a learning disability and with deficits in communication. Audrey said:

I was never satisfied with the diagnosis. . . . I don’t think that they diagnosed her with the right thing. I think she was basically pushed along the system. . . . I think she is more under the Autism umbrella.

As a researcher it became evident through the interview series with Alice and Audrey that Alice did not share common traits with the other students who I have interviewed who also have LD. I was very struck by Alice’s over sensitivity to loud noises and crowded hallways, not typical concerns for students who have LD. So when Audrey talked about the idea of a misdiagnosis I felt that she was correct and was sympathetic to the fact that she may have been forced to advocate for the wrong services all through Alice’s schooling. I asked myself, could a missed diagnosis be the reason why the home and the school could not come to an understanding concerning Alice’s needs? Had she been diagnosed under the autism spectrum would teachers and administration have been more flexible in supporting Alice?

### **Exosystem**

Each of Alice’s family members had a direct as well as an indirect influence on Alice’s school experiences and transition planning. From inherited genes to the influence of her parents’ educational experiences to the desire to follow in her sisters’ footsteps and go to college, the

experiences of each family member played a role in the decisions made for Alice's transition.

Audrey confessed, "I have an LD as well. I know how hard it is, but she has so many more difficulties than I did." Audrey's persistence came from her own struggle as a student. Like Audrey, Oliver had learning problems as a child and adolescent; it was difficult for him to graduate from secondary school. "He was never tested but he has had problems with learning. Yet he can take a car apart and put it back together and it works." Oliver thought that his own experiences made him more sensitive and understanding toward Alice.

Alice's sisters, Jane and Beth, had both graduated from secondary school and were attending college; Alice said, "So that is why I want to go." Beth was a positive influence on Alice, who took some of Beth's interests and adopted them herself: "I am really interested in Anime myth and legends art. My sister got me into it." Beth also "got her hooked on fan-fiction. That has helped her with her reading and now she is addicted to it."

Audrey and Oliver did not direct their children toward specific jobs or career paths. Beth said, "They just wanted us to try to do something we liked." Both older daughters said that they "realized that to get a good job nowadays you have to at least get a college education—even if it is not much. You have to at least try and go to college." Alice valued college because she wanted to follow in her sister's footsteps.

### **Macrosystem**

In terms of Alice's ability to transition into an independent life in the outside world, her parents and sisters saw some difficulty. Both Audrey and Oliver were concerned: "I wonder if she could ever hold a job down. She will always have to live at home. . . . As we get older we will have to go through further steps to make sure she is looked after." Their biggest concern was not whether Alice would find a job and get married. It was, "If something happened to us, who would take care of Alice?" Alice's parents saw many obstacles to Alice's ability to fit into society independently.

As Alice moved toward transitioning out of secondary-school, having the appropriate label for her disability was becoming more and more important. Once Audrey and Oliver recognized that going to college was not possible, they decided that Alice's best option would be to get into the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), because Audrey herself had found employment success through that program. Audrey said:

I have been leaning toward ODSP (Ontario Disability Support Program). They will do tests and assessments with her and they will decide if she can go into the work force. If she can't, they will put her on an allowance. If she can, they will pay for the program for her, to help develop skills that she can use in workplace.

### **Summary**

Alice and her family members had a variety of difficult challenges to face while Alice worked through her secondary education. School support was inconsistent and often ineffective. Her school program did not meet the requirements needed to fill the transition to college that her family expected. Moreover, Alice was not able to function in her educational setting in a way that would facilitate a transition to college. However, this was still her plan. Audrey looked into ODSP because it was a program with which she was familiar. This was the first time in the interview process that Audrey mentioned skill development and the idea that Alice could work on improving some of her skills so that she could adapt to her environment. Unfortunately, I discovered in later communications with Audrey that Alice did not qualify for ODSP.

In terms of Alice finding a job, her communication problems would be her biggest obstacle. Alice said that if she did get a job she would need a boss who could adjust to her learning disability. The themes running through the interaction with this family were the adjustments and coping strategies that each family member took on in order to facilitate Alice. It appeared to me that Alice did not make these concessions; the people around her made them in order to fit her into their family and school environment. Likewise they have found their own ways of fitting into Alice's world. They have had to find a way to connect with her.

## Chapter 5- Robin Family

Be as a bird perched on a frail branch that she feels bending beneath her, still she sings away all the same, knowing she has wings

--Victor Hugo

Laura, a 19-year-old student in her first year of university, was born in Ukraine. With her parents, Fiona and Tom, and her younger sister, Violet, Laura immigrated to Canada when she was five years old. Her maternal grandparents also came with the family. Fiona and Tom both attained master's level education in Ukraine. In Canada, they worked in professional careers and had high expectations for Laura's education. As an immigrant, Laura felt like an outsider; elementary school was difficult for her socially. She described it thus:

I always felt like I was a weird person, the odd one out. I didn't know how to speak English when we first arrived so I was learning English while going to school and I would use phrases incorrectly and misunderstand words. I felt like no one wanted to talk to me because I was the weird kid.

Laura said that she had few friends in school and her enjoyment came from her academic accomplishments. She developed a strong work ethic and focused her attention on her studies. Laura excelled in most subjects. When there was a concept that she did not understand, she strove to improve herself by seeking support from teachers and family members. Laura learned to enjoy math because, she said, "my grandmother started tutoring me in math; she did it according to the Ukraine curriculum and I finally just got it. I enjoyed it so much. I started to like everything about learning and school." Laura took French immersion from Grades 4 to 8 and became fluent in four languages: Ukrainian, Russian, English, and French. After school, she spent hours completing her homework independently and, although she worked very hard, she did not appear to struggle academically in her elementary school years. Her learning and emotional problems developed later and with few warning signs. This family became aware of Laura's learning disability because of secondary factors that created emotional turmoil for Laura. This turmoil, in turn, strained family relationships. With respect to interviews, Laura contacted me and was eager to tell her story. She then recruited her parents to participate. Fiona, Laura's mother, was reluctant but wanted to participate to support her daughter and throughout the interview process seemed to find the conversations therapeutic. She would often become very emotional during interview sessions. Tom was a reluctant participant but agreed to be

interviewed. Violet, Laura's sister, chose not to participate. Fiona said that rehashing the last few years would be too painful for Violet because she had chosen to put those memories behind her.

### **Family in Crisis**

As a toddler, Fiona told me that Laura began talking early and was able to read in English at age three. She said that Laura was very successful in elementary school and considered gifted by her teachers. Throughout elementary school, she often received awards for her academic abilities in language and math. It was in secondary school where things started to fall apart for Laura and when her parents and teachers began to notice a change in her behaviour. When Laura was in Grade 10, Fiona and Tom saw that she was having some emotional problems and her grades were dropping. "She was having difficulty sleeping at night, getting at most three hours. She was also moody and had broken out in a rash," explained her mother. Fiona observed that just before these symptoms appeared, she and Laura went on restrictive diets to lose weight. Fiona described it thus:

The doctor suggested a diet for me and I put Laura on it as well because at 15 she weighed 197 pounds. I found out later that it was a mistake to put her on that diet because she was not supposed to have so many restrictions at her age.

Fiona described, that as Laura began to lose weight she seemed happy; and then, she began skipping meals and at one point, stopped eating altogether. When Fiona took Laura to the doctor to discuss a strange rash and mood changes, Laura's blood tests showed that her rapid weight loss was giving her kidney and immune system problems. As well, the school was asking questions because Laura had fainted during an art class. Laura explained:

I was so busy with my work so I didn't eat because I was doing my homework. Then I went to my art class and I had to lean against a table to rest my eyes and everyone thought that I had fainted so they called an ambulance. I told them that I was hungry and I need to eat but they wouldn't give me anything to eat until I got to the hospital. Then when I got there the doctor told me to eat crackers.

Fiona and Tom became very concerned when, on a family trip, Laura talked about suicide. Fiona recalled:

I want to remember it as a nice trip but I can't. Laura had a break down. She was covering mirrors with blankets and she would say 'I'm so ugly, I don't want to look at myself.' That is when she said that she wanted to commit suicide.

Tom, not always sensitive to Laura's needs, made a remark to Laura that pushed her to cut herself. She broke a vase and began to scratch her skin. When the family came home, Fiona brought her to a doctor who referred her to a psychologist. She was diagnosed with serious depression and was hospitalized for an eating disorder.

Laura described her eating disorder as something that she was not in control of, and therefore did not consider it an actual eating disorder under the category of mental illness. She explained, "I stopped eating because I had lost my appetite. It made me sick to look at food and I couldn't sleep because, when I did sleep, I would have hallucinations." The MRI and various other tests indicated that she was fine physically. The issue was an emotional one. Laura was placed in an eating disorder clinic but still rejected the idea that her loss of appetite was an eating disorder: "I don't believe that I had an eating disorder. If you have an eating disorder then you decide not to eat, but I wanted to eat—I just couldn't." Laura was initially very unco-operative with her doctors, who wanted to label her with an eating disorder. She initially refused to stay at the clinic but soon realized that she needed help in order to eat and to gain an appetite. She returned to the clinic and was willing to accept the help, "not because I thought I had an eating disorder. So when I went back they didn't call it an eating disorder because they knew what my beliefs were." This distinction was important to Laura and once the doctors at the clinic acknowledged her position, Laura became co-operative and opened herself to the process of receiving therapy. Fiona described Laura's strong will: "She refused to stay more than one week in the hospital, but she promised to do everything the doctor told her to do as long as she could go home." Fiona went on to say, "Her perfectionist attitude had helped. It made her follow rules to the letter and she started to get well fast." Laura thought that her strong will helped her to overcome the depression. She said, "Instead of taking medication, I decided to talk myself out of it. I didn't believe I had depression so then I wanted to prove it. So I made myself say, 'No, you are not depressed.'" Laura believed this self-talk was key in helping her to overcome her depression. After returning home, Fiona found homeopathic medication that allowed Laura to sleep through the night. Once she started sleeping better and eating, Laura observed, "I had likes and dislikes again and I ate and enjoyed food." Laura began to feel better and expressed an interest in returning to school. With Laura's health stable, Fiona and Tom agreed that she could return to school.

## **Laura and School**

In Grade 10, Laura began experiencing extreme difficulty in school. In addition to her illness, she experienced poor concentration, slow processing speed, and inability to follow instructions from her teachers. Her grades were lower and she had incomplete assignments in all her courses. Laura said, “I felt like a zombie.” She began the process of assessment in Grade 10 and was formally diagnosed with LD in Grade 11. Laura described the assessment process as offensive and negative: “I felt like a lab rat. They kept analyzing what was wrong with me. I hated listening to them trying to figure me out.” After the diagnosis and implementation of accommodations, Laura said that school got better. She was able to concentrate, but she said, “I was still so slow to process things at school—I guess it was a processing thing. In class I would be listening or writing but I couldn’t do both.” In terms of accommodations, Laura relied on the support of teachers who were flexible with deadlines. She described her difficulties thus:

I took history in Grade 11 and I would have failed it because I didn’t hand in my final project. Writing essays was difficult for me. I found that I was a perfectionist and I wanted to get everything written down right the first time. Then with teachers emphasizing the issue of plagiarism, that freaked me out. I didn’t understand the concept of references and it made me crazy. I began to procrastinate on all assignments that I was scared to start and started that history assignment the day it was due. I didn’t finish my history course that semester.

**School support.** Laura’s resource teacher recommended that she take the learning strategies course to learn time management and organization skills and to get help with homework. Additionally, her teachers allowed her to finish the history assignments that she had not submitted. With this accommodation and the help of the learning strategies course, Laura earned her history credit. Laura reflected:

I think our school had a really good special education department. My resource teacher told me that I could go to her office to get help with any of my assignments any time I needed to. She offered me extra time when I needed and when I didn’t understand what the teacher wanted me to do, she told me that I could come to her office during my spare to get my work done.

Laura did not need accommodations in elementary school because she had not been struggling academically. She said, “I didn’t have an LD in elementary school. I feel that something

triggered it.” In Grade 10, “all of a sudden I couldn’t follow what was going on in class. They [the psychologists] said I have had it all the time, but I learned to cope. Then something happened in Grade 10 that made me ‘crack.’” After her diagnosis, Laura received extra time on tests and on assignments because of high levels of anxiety and slowness in organizing her thoughts. She reported, “I had unlimited time; I could start a test in the morning and write it all day.” Laura admitted that normally there were rules about the extra time that she was allowed: “It should have been time and a half but they gave me time and a half as a minimum.” Laura’s teachers and resource teacher were very flexible with her accommodations. In Grade 12, she began to gain coping strategies to manage her anxiety and her teachers reduced the unlimited time to time and a half. Laura admitted that this was to help her manage her time, so that she would learn to write faster. When given the entire day to write an exam, she said, “I took it all up until the last second. I spent a lot of time on the questions that I didn’t know so it was like the last half of the day would be a waste of time.” The perfectionist trait in Laura would not allow her to give up on any question. But not knowing the answers frustrated her and made it hard for her to move past the missed question. On noting this pattern of behaviour, the resource teacher decided that time and a half was sufficient. Laura described her stubborn and persistent nature as a strength that had come from having to persevere with a learning disability. When describing her work ethic, she said:

I am stubborn and I really want to get down to the answer always. I have to get my work done. It might kill me, but I have to do it. It almost feels like it will kill me when I have to write an essay. I hate it so much it is actually physically painful.

Leaving work undone or submitting work late was hard for Laura and she put considerable pressure on herself to reach deadlines; if she could not meet a deadline she became “frozen, like a deer in the headlights.” Her diagnosis and accommodations allowed her to see that she needed to take the extra time given to submit assignments.

Laura did have some teachers who were unwilling to give her extra time on tests and extend deadlines for assignments. Laura found that in Grades 10 and 11 she did not need to self-advocate because she could count on her resource teacher to handle the communications with her chemistry teacher who initially would not provide accommodations. This intervention was very helpful during Grade 11, because Laura was focused on maintaining good health and catching up in her academics. She found that this same teacher felt he had been unfair and was more

accepting of her needs the next year, after he had seen how hard she worked. To have this teacher apologize for his actions during a very difficult year was very satisfying to the family and the acknowledgement was appreciated. Laura really connected to those teachers who took extra steps to help her be successful. Her English teacher would often test Laura orally and she excelled during this type of testing. This teacher stressed the following:

Life is more than just school—as long as you pass, you are okay. It’s more important that you are healthy and happy and if you are too stressed about school then you are working too hard—so go out tonight and have fun.

It appeared that this message was an important one for this studious student. Laura said, “I would spend my evenings doing my work instead of hanging out with friends. I never got my homework done so I never got to go out to play.” Laura recognized that she needed to take more time to enjoy life; hearing this message from an authority gave it more weight and gave her permission to make time for her social life.

It seemed to me that during this difficult period she found school to be a positive place; she said it “kept me going because I knew that I had something to do that day so that I couldn’t sit home and sulk.” Though she struggled to stay on top of the work load in secondary school, she also appreciated her diagnosis of LD and the support she received from her teachers. This support gave her refuge and a place to go when she needed a break from the classroom and when she wanted to talk about the different struggles she was facing academically and emotionally. It appeared so me that the emotional stress that Laura felt during Grades 10 and 11 did not change her persistence and her strong work ethic. She described her aim:

I still wanted to go to school every day and to accomplish something every day. Going to school is what kept me going. Even though I felt depressed inside and even though I didn’t have a lot of friends to talk to, it gave me a purpose.

**Social.** With respect to her social situation, Laura noted,

I was never the popular kid. I was made fun of. . . . I remember in Grade 9, there was a dance and a guy from class wrote “I love Laura” on his hand. Another girl told me about it and told me to go to the dance and they would be there. I went to the dance and they weren’t there. It hurt my feelings.

Laura described her social group as “the outcasts.” Laura’s focus in high school was more on her schoolwork than her social life. She said that she was not bothered by many social problems but

also admitted: “I was living in my own world like a little bit of a zombie. There might have been people making fun of me but I think more people were concerned about me.” As the researcher listening to her talk about her struggles which were heart breaking and worrisome, this comment touched me. It was the first time during our lengthy interview conversations that I felt that she had a mature kind of self-awareness that would see her through this difficult time. She went on to tell me that during her stay in the hospital a few of the cool girls asked her friends how she was doing; she was surprised that they cared. In terms of support, Laura described some of her friends as “more acquaintances—people that I used to hang out with all the time—but then, when I was going through my hard times, they strived to avoid me.” She had a few friends who were there to support her and others who acted like she didn’t exist.

Laura began to develop confidence and felt accepted once she began to see a psychologist to talk about her depression issues. That experience “started to help me talk to others. I would talk to anyone who would listen. One girl I knew from school that was also at the eating disorder clinic, I would tell her all about how I was doing.” Laura recognized:

I don’t know if that was the smartest thing to do. I ended up finding an old school mate on Facebook and started talking to them about it and they started to ignore me. I asked if we could just forget about what I said and they said, “No, stop talking to me.”

Laura saw these ups and downs as a process on the way to her recovery and was not embarrassed by these interactions. Laura said, “I was really glad to have the happy ending to high school.” In Grade 12, she had friends whom she could trust and she became more social. She described her progress as follows:

I would talk to people who I wouldn’t talk to before. I am still not very social but I am not as shy. . . . I am glad to have gone through what I have gone through. It has made me a stronger person.

**Transition Planning.** After experiencing so much depression and stress in secondary school, Laura confided: “I decided to go to university right after Grade 12 because I knew that if I didn’t go right away then I would never go back to school.” Moreover, her parents had always instilled in her the expectation that she attend university and the importance of a university education leading to a good paying job. Laura had always wanted to be a teacher. Like her father, she enjoyed math and was working on a degree in math because she wanted to teach math to secondary school students. Laura believed that she would be a better teacher if she got

experience somewhere before she taught. She was inspired by her secondary school chemistry teacher who had worked as a chemist before becoming a teacher and who had significant life experience to impart to his students.

In terms of transition planning, Laura thought that her secondary school program prepared her to transition to university. Her program of university-stream classes throughout secondary school prepared her for the content and workload of university classes. Laura's resource teacher recommended that she take part in a transition program offered at a local university. The program included different workshops about effective transitioning, time management, and the use of technological devices. In terms of formal documentation and meetings concerning her transition, neither Laura nor Fiona recalled seeing a transition plan document and neither attended a meeting regarding the transition plan. "I definitely didn't have a meeting with my resource teacher and a principal to go over my goals for the future," noted Laura. She recalled only one meeting to discuss her diagnosis and accommodations, but there had been no mention of a transition plan. However, she did feel that her learning strategies course had been effective in helping to develop her career goals.

It seemed to me that Laura's parents guided and groomed her toward setting the goal of attending a university. While Laura was ill, her parents worried that university study might be too stressful for her and they had their doubts about post-secondary education. However, after her diagnosis and recovery, her marks improved and they started to believe that she could earn a university degree. Laura's goal was to graduate from a university as her parents had done before her.

In terms of work experience, Laura was not able to take a co-operative program in secondary school. She applied for this course but was not accepted because the placement spots were reserved for students taking general and applied courses. Laura's work experience was limited to part-time summer jobs. Laura tried to maintain a job while taking courses in secondary school, but the stress of balancing her courses with work hours was too much for her to handle.

For Laura, she describes the experience of attending university has been very positive and has built her confidence. Socially, Laura was not intimidated: "There are no cool kids. You can talk to anyone you want to and not feel rejected." Laura has also reduced some of the pressure on herself to be a perfectionist. She said:

In math, even if I am lost I know that other people are lost too. You are not necessarily

friends with everyone but everyone understands what you are going through to some degree and everyone there is willing to help each other.

### **Fiona and Laura**

Fiona described her role in Laura's life during the last few years. As I listened, it seemed to me to be one of protector and perhaps over-protector but I understood her motivation to protect and to keep a close eye. At times, during her depression, Laura wanted to be alone and took walks by herself. Fiona admitted: "I realize now that she needed to be alone but at first I wouldn't let her go. I didn't want her to be alone." Fiona encouraged Laura to open up and talk about her problems. She said, "As her mother, I wanted to relieve her pain and suffering and I tried everything to be there for her." However, Laura often rejected Fiona's offers of support. Laura had entered a phase where she would not accept her mother's help and often retreated into her room or remained zombie-like around her family. Violet was very affected by the change in her sister. According to Fiona, Violet was angered by what she viewed as Laura hurting and rejecting their mother. Fiona commented, "My youngest noticed that all of my attention was going to Laura and my youngest (Violet) had a few breakdowns and I thought, 'What am I doing? I am losing another kid?'" Fiona changed her over-protective behaviour toward Laura and spent more time with Violet. To her surprise, she noticed that Laura appreciated having more freedom. Fiona explained, "I was watching her from the side, but she knows if she needed my help I would be right there." When Laura's guidance counsellor recommended that she be assessed for an LD, Fiona said, "I wanted to hit him. I couldn't believe it. How can you do so well in school and have LD?" The test results indicated that Laura was gifted and had a non-verbal learning disability. Fiona and Tom were shocked. Fiona said:

I didn't want to hear that my kid had a LD. I am still embarrassed to talk about it. I never talk about it with other people only with family. I do like to tell other people about her being gifted, but LD—that makes me feel that she is not normal.

In terms of advocacy, Laura handled most of the situations in secondary school on her own. She developed supportive relationships with some of her teachers and she relied on her resource teacher to lead her in advocacy. Fiona offered to advocate for her daughter, but Laura found it easier to explain to her teachers what she needed from them on her own. On the other hand, Fiona kept a careful eye on Laura and was very concerned about her physical and emotional health. It seemed to me that taking care of Laura's health was Fiona's primary focus. Fiona

remarked, “I try to help her but she doesn’t want my help. She says if I help her then it wouldn’t be her work.” This was frustrating for Fiona as she watched Laura struggle to complete homework: “She is a perfectionist and she works very slowly and it’s hard to watch her struggle.” Laura continued to self-advocate at the university level, believing that she was capable of managing her own educational goals.

Fiona expressed that Laura was too self-reliant, refusing assistance from her family. This situation forced Fiona to push herself into Laura’s life, which in turn made Laura withdraw more from her family. Fiona commented, “She always tries to avoid any topic that she is stressed about. If I ask her about her exam she says, ‘I don’t want to talk about it!’ She never talks about things that stress her.” Fiona was concerned that holding on to stress and being unwilling to ask for help would cause Laura to go back into her depression. It was clear from our conversation that dealing with Laura’s emotional problems the last few years took its toll on Fiona and she would often become very emotional during our interview sessions: “I was strong for half a year. But I would cry to myself when she was not around. It had become very hard and one day I snapped. I have had to seek professional help.” Laura said that her mother at times had given her a great deal of support and at other times had hindered support. Laura said: “When I saw the toll that my problems were having on her, I would have to censor myself and be there for her. I felt guilty for making her upset. So I began to withdraw in order to hide my feelings.”

Fiona was satisfied with Laura’s progress over the past year: “She is much, much, better now. I am really happy about that. She still takes too much on, so that worries me.” Fiona described Laura’s work ethic as a hindrance which she worried would cause stress, including, procrastination, working very slowly, moving very slowly, and forgetting things. Hence Fiona did not think her daughter should take too much on. She stated, “[Laura] wants to be in all the clubs. She wants to be a one week guide during frosh week, she is working at the book store, she has her classes and she has two jobs.” Fiona suggested that Laura take fewer courses per semester but Laura looked on that as a failure and would not drop a course unless she was failing one.

### **Laura and Violet**

Violet, two years younger than Laura, did not want to be interviewed; therefore, Fiona and Laura described the relationship between the girls. Fiona admitted that the relationship between her daughters was strained and that her role in parenting both girls was different: “I am

not as worried about Violet as I am worried about Laura. I believe more in Violet even though she is younger. I rely on her to help Laura.” Fiona expressed that Violet did not like to talk about Laura and she never wanted to re-live her depression experiences. Fiona noted that, in her own interactions with Violet, she had to suppress venting her fears about Laura. She explained: “If I talk to Violet about my concerns for Laura she says, ‘Mom please, when you are with me, talk to *me* about *me* not about Laura.’” As children they were close but, as Laura began to retreat into herself and as her emotional problems began to cause stress among the family members. After hearing both women describe this relationship it seemed to me that Violet started to resent the effects of Laura’s instability on the other family members. While Laura was in her depression, Fiona recalled: “They had a pretty hard relationship. Violet was scared to be around her and she would yell and scream at Laura to get away.”

Fiona reflected that Violet behaved like the older sister and Laura followed her around wanting to connect to her. She described the relationship as one where Violet controlled the situation and set boundaries when it came to Laura. Fiona said, “Violet will say to Laura, ‘Get out of my room,’ while Laura, who really loves her sister and wants to spend a lot of time with her, would never tell Violet to go away.” Fiona and Laura told me that Violet spent the majority of time with her friends and rarely included Laura in her social plans. However, Fiona was glad to see that, after spending some time together on a trip to Europe that summer, the girls became closer.

From Laura’s perspective, Violet was a support to her for many years. Echoing her mother, Laura explained that over the last few years their roles have reversed. Violet, though younger, had taken on the role of an older, nurturing, caregiving sister. Laura explained:

Violet really took care of me when I was sick. She tried to get me to eat and listened to my problems. She got irritated with me sometimes and I could be a real bitch sometimes. I know that my talk of suicide really affected her. When I started to get better, she started to go off more with her own friends. She became really cliquish and she would ignore me and act like she didn’t want to know me at school. It’s just her age. I can’t believe that she stuck by me when I was going through that rough time. Even now she will notice when I am upset and she will listen.

Laura felt that she and Violet got closer as they matured. She said that she tried to be a friend to Violet and to support her in return for all the support she had been given.

## **Laura and Tom**

Tom, Laura's father, agreed to be interviewed for this study and though I sensed that he was uncomfortable sharing these personal details about his family, I felt that he was open and honest in his responses. He mainly conveyed his concern for Laura, as well as his helplessness and ignorance in his efforts to try to support her. Both Fiona and Laura said that Tom—a high achiever himself—did not understand his daughter's learning disability or any weaknesses in academic achievement and emotional character. Fiona recalled:

He would sometimes yell at her. I would try to help her to do something she had trouble with and he would say, "No, she can do it." His reaction to her was stern and cold, but in his heart it really affected him.

Tom described feeling shocked by the idea that Laura could have a learning disability:

She had been quite a good student. I wasn't concerned with her being labelled but with her being sick and I was very concerned about her being closed off and not talking to anybody. Then they said she had LD, I couldn't believe it.

It seemed that though he did try to help Laura in his own way, he recognized that he may not always have given the right kind of support. He realized: "I can try to help her but she needed to find it in herself. The best thing for Laura is to help herself." Tom became more tolerant and open-minded about the term *disability*. In terms of her future, Tom described a plan for Laura and his clear expectations: "I want her to set short-term and long-term goals. I don't care about what the goals are but I want her to concentrate and work on her goals on a day-by-day basis."

### **Summary of Themes using Systems Theory**

In terms of Laura's transition plans, her interactions within each ecological system—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem—have produced specific themes. These themes are detailed below.

#### **Microsystem**

It appeared to me that in this family, Laura's learning disability and health problems were a dominating factor that changed the roles within the family. It seemed that Fiona became overly protective, a trait which Laura resented: "She is protective, controlling, and smothering. She still gives me a bedtime. I think I should be able to decide when I am tired." Laura really loved and respected her mother but admitted that she had trouble *showing* respect for her mother, and said, "During my depression, mom cracked and would start to cry uncontrollably so I had to comfort

her. It made me feel that I can't tell her anything because I might upset her." Ironically, Laura's only real supporter became someone whom Laura felt she needed to protect. Furthermore it appeared to me that this situation limited her ability to cope. Fiona's emotional outbursts because of Laura's illness created more unbalance within the family. Violet looked at how her mother fell apart and began to resent Laura for being the cause of these family problems. Fiona admitted: "Most of my attention went to Laura, everything went to Laura. We are trying to change it now, but when she was sick everything went to her." Violet's behaviour also changed during Laura's illness; she was there to support her sister during the most difficult times, but withdrew once Laura's mental and physical health improved. The relationship between them has had to be rebuilt and from Laura's perspective it was on its way to being fully healed. Her relationship with her father also went through a transformation. Laura, once afraid of him, grew to admire and respect him. Laura felt that she could relate more to her father than anyone else in her family: "His personality is similar to mine and the way we think is similar; we are logical thinkers." Tom was an engineer and studied math and Laura bonded with him over that interest.

It appeared to me that the late diagnosis of LD had an effect in the dynamics of this family of high educational achievers. Fiona and Tom had trouble understanding Laura's sudden deficits in learning because she had always achieved good grades. When her grades dropped, they encouraged her to work harder, putting more pressure on Laura's perfectionist character. It seemed to me that when Laura could no longer cope, she had a mental breakdown that led the family into crisis during which time the family dynamics changed.

### **Mesosystem**

Laura found support in a few teachers at her school. She became close to her resource teacher, a person she considered a friend and to whom she confided her feelings on several occasions. This teacher was a very important role model for Laura and she was supportive at a time when Laura could not talk to anyone at home. In terms of transition planning, the school was supportive of Laura's plan to attend university but the initial plan was decided by Laura and her parents. The school did not necessarily consider Laura an obvious candidate for university education. Laura said, "Before I made it clear to them that I was determined to go to university, they said, 'You don't have to go to university; there are so many other good opportunities.'" Laura remarked that she noticed the other students who had learning disabilities were not encouraged to go to university. She remembered: "The others seemed to be just planning to get

through high school. I was the only one going to university.”

Fiona also noticed the school’s reticence to recommend future university studies. She recalled one encounter with a teacher who

told me with no question “She will not graduate.” I was worried at the time about her health so I didn’t want to think about it [the idea that she would not graduate]. I didn’t want to admit that I was worried.

Fiona and Tom began to monitor Laura to make sure that her grades were sufficiently high for her to graduate. Both parents were very proud when Laura qualified to apply to the general arts program at the local university.

### **Exosystem**

Tom and Fiona claimed that this experience with Laura brought them closer together and said, “When we have a common problem it unites us even more.” It seemed to me that there were times when tensions between Fiona and Tom and also between Fiona and Violet were high. These tensions certainly had an effect on Laura, causing her to withdraw at times from the family. Violet retreated and spent her time with friends rather than with family. It took several years before she became open to a friendship with Laura. Tom handled his emotions using “tough love” with Laura; Fiona became emotionally unstable. It appeared to me that the stress in the family and everyone handling this stress in different ways caused Laura to feel unsupported at times. Then, she looked elsewhere to vent her emotions. She was fortunate to have found a supportive listener in her resource teacher. At other times she vented to her peers who did not reciprocate and were not interested in hearing about her problems.

### **Macrosystem**

Laura contemplated her future by looking back on her past. She remembered how supported she was by nurses and doctors in the hospital when she battled her eating disorder and depression. She wanted to help others in her position by becoming a counsellor. She also felt that teaching was an option, and that she would like to work with children with learning disabilities. Helping others who have similar experiences to her own was one of her goals.

### **Summary**

At an early age, Laura was well aware of her parents’ expectation that she graduate from university. She was bright and worked hard but I wondered if her undiagnosed learning disability, combined with her perfectionist attitude, may have contributed to added stress and

perhaps to secondary disabilities: depression and an eating disorder. During her treatment for these mental health issues, her family offered their support but they also had some personal demons to battle. Laura knew that her family supported her, although at times she perceived them as controlling and smothering. In the end, it appeared to me that her transition to university was successful because she had a clear vision of her goals, learned to advocate and coped with her own academic and emotional needs. In essence, I believe that her transition process was guided by the goal of university studies initiated by her parents and adopted by Laura as a personal expectation.

It appeared to me through the interview process that Laura's undiagnosed LD and mental health concerns had a lasting effect on each member in her family system. In terms of the microsystem, levels of trust and feelings of security were created between Laura and her family members. Within the family system the roles changed: the older sibling became the one who needed to be cared for by the younger, the matriarch and protector became as emotional as a child who needed protecting, the unapproachable patriarch learned to understand his child's weakness and adapted his behaviours to support her. The family was involved in a rebirth, discovering new roles and mending relationships with new awareness and understanding of each other's needs.

## Chapter 6 - Sparrow Family

I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will . . .

Charlotte Bronte

This case study consisted of two individuals. The first was a male 16-year-old adolescent, who asked to be called Darth Vader. This request was interesting and consistent with this eccentric and original individual. His request was satisfied in part; in this case study, he is referred to as Darth. As young as he was at the time of this interview, he had a strong sense of himself, a self-awareness that one would not expect of a teenager going through any kind of transition. It seemed that some of the struggles that he faced through his schooling and in his personal life helped him to come to terms with the qualities that he felt made him stand out. His mother, Donna was the other participant and I think of her as a strong and forceful advocate in her son's education. Darth was the only child of recently divorced parents and Donna requested that I not invite Darth's father to participate in this study.

Both Darth and Donna explained that Darth experienced significant unhappiness while in school. His elementary years were particularly harsh. In contrast, his middle and secondary school experience seemed to have facilitated his creative personality. He has learned to embrace the "differentness" that he felt throughout his early school experiences as qualities that made him original. Darth asked if he could strum on the guitar during the interviews—it relaxed him and cut down his fidgeting. It appeared to me that this 16-year-old boy really knew himself, knew that he was different, and did not care about social norms, such as refraining from fidgeting or from swearing during the interview. At the same time he was very charming and polite and provided considerable insight into his experiences. Darth's current school program was one that focused on the arts. It has given him the ability to find his niche with interests that fed his spirit and has allowed him to make friends who shared his interests. Donna, his mother, seemed to be key in facilitating his school program; she recognized his creative personality and exposed him to every opportunity that would allow him to follow his dream of attending an arts-based school and pursuing a career in film.

### **Darth and School**

Darth began to experience problems in school when he was in Kindergarten. Donna stated, "He had sensory integration dysfunction; he didn't know where his body was in space. He also had speech issues." Darth had trouble dealing with the rhythm of the classroom, and

although he needed the mental stimuli the school provided, he did not fit in or make friends. Donna said, “He would walk through kids’ blocks on the carpet because he didn’t have the social and spatial skills to understand that he could walk around the blocks instead of walking straight to where he wanted to go.” Darth also had speech problems, difficulty pronouncing and articulating sounds such as *s*’s, *p*’s, and *r*’s. He had difficulty with articulation but his language acquisition was at a Grade 4 vocabulary level. Darth technically failed Kindergarten because he did not meet enough objectives of the program but he was formally passed to Grade 1. Donna described her frustration with his Kindergarten teachers for not being willing to work with him on these objectives and for not communicating with her about his problems at school

In Grade 1, Darth entered a French immersion program and Donna was grateful that he had excellent teachers. One of these teachers said to Donna, “You have a very bright boy but he is not learning. . . . He is the first boy that I have sent for testing that I don’t know what the problem is.” Donna appreciated the teacher’s acknowledgement that some problem existed with Darth’s learning. Although Darth was tested in Grade 1, he had to wait until he had fallen three years behind for a formal diagnosis. In the meantime, the tests showed that his short-term memory was poor, a factor which contributed to a scattered performance. Donna explained, “he is the kind of kid who would be called lazy because he learns from the big picture then breaks it down into little pieces. Meanwhile, schools teach kids to go from little pieces to the big picture.”Darth was formally diagnosed in Grade 4 with a non-verbal learning disability and giftedness. Darth had difficulty with reading fluency and he struggled to read although he had a high level of reading comprehension. Darth was removed from the French immersion program and placed in a mainstream class in Grade 2. Learning basic grammar in Grade 2 was difficult for him because, as he described:

I was really anal about the facts in the books that I had to correct for grammar. The facts were often incorrect. The sentence would be “Beavers’ favourite food is bark,” and I would be like “Beavers eat bark not for sustenance but to knock the tree over to create a dam.” The teacher would be like “Shut up.”

Darth was prescribed anxiety medication to control his compulsive behaviour. There was a family history of anxiety and depression; Darth’s father had a mental illness. Donna believed that “his anxiety is a result of his learning disability. He has always been a cautious kid but certainly I believe that his learning disability has greatly exacerbated his anxiety.” As well, Darth was

persistently bullied as a child and both Darth and Donna felt that his learning disability contributed to the differentness he felt among his peers.

In elementary school Darth had difficulty with teachers, many of whom both Darth and Donna felt were “not good at their jobs”. Darth recalled his Grade 4 teacher in particular, “She hated me and every student pretty much.” Darth explained that when he was having social problems at school this teacher would not deal with the problem by asking questions and getting down to the root cause. Instead Darth said that he felt that he was not being heard because she would try to encourage students to drop their problems with each other and to go on being friends. Darth wanted a teacher to step in and listen to his needs in terms of facilitating appropriate friendships. He felt the teacher let him continue to be bullied by his peers. Darth described his feelings thus:

In school, I was the lowest on the pecking order. I don't know how I got through elementary school actually. I must have had a thick skin back then because now when I am insulted even jokingly it hurts a lot more than it did back then. If I didn't have a thick skin back then I wouldn't have survived.

During his Grade 4 year, Darth explained that he was “sick” a lot “because I couldn't stand the teacher.” He admitted that “it wasn't the best coping strategy I guess, but it made life easier.” Being “sick” meant that he did not have to do a lot of his school work. He said, “I am a fairly lazy and disorganized person about things that I don't care about. School was one of those things that I didn't care about.” In Grade 4, Donna explained that Darth (who had been diagnosed with an LD and giftedness) began to withdraw from school because he did not feel supported and accepted by his teacher and he did not have friends. Darth described another coping mechanism he learned out of a need to get by, after he realized that some teachers do not care about the final product.

I spend an hour on homework every night and if they asked me to draw three apples I drew the best three apples that I could draw and that is why it took me so long. The teachers didn't want me working that hard. So then in Grade 3, I learned to strive for a B. Get exactly the right amount of work on paper to get a B, then I pass and I am not at the bottom of the class and never really the center of attention.

In middle school, Darth began to find academic and social success. During these years, he found coping mechanisms to deal with his reading difficulty as well as his writing skills. He

found the use of a computer helped him to manage his work load. He said, “By Grade 8, writing was one of my strengths.” One of Darth’s biggest deficits was his inability to stay organized. While he had tools such as an agenda and the help of an EA to make him stay organized, Donna said, “He hated her. I was so glad that she was there to help him and not me. It is really hard to help your kids with their weaknesses.” Having to have an EA during his teen years caused some social stress and rebellion in Darth. Even though Darth was happier in school because he had a social group of a few friends, at times he could still be a target. In middle school, Darth had two lockers and a shelf to store his things. In Grade 8, he moved into one locker. When he was in secondary school, his locker was taken by another student. As a result, because he had no locker, he carried his belongings and books to and from school every day. It seemed to me that his organizational deficits and need for structure and space were trumped by social pressure of fitting in and not wanting to make a fuss and stand out among his peers. Naturally, Darth’s need for belonging and safety in school among his peers was more important than his one need for self-esteem in standing up to those who bullied him. He was happier not having to face those students and would deal with a book bag of disorganized courses.

**School supports.** It became clear to me and Donna confirmed that Darth began to experience success and happiness when he reached middle school and attended an alternative school setting. In this program, every teacher provided Darth with the accommodations that suited his needs and that kept him in the classroom. The teachers used tiered level instruction with activities that used multiple intelligences. Darth would have the option to demonstrate his understanding of the material through means, such as music, to show that he grasped a concept. Donna said that Darth gained self-esteem while in this school setting and started to make close friends. In terms of accommodations Darth explained that he could have a quiet room and the use of a computer for tests, but that he often preferred to stay in the classroom and did not take the accommodations. He found that teachers were accommodating toward him. It appeared to me that the kindness from teachers in his middle school helped to develop his confidence and allowed him to express himself while in school.

Darth said that he was reluctant to use the accommodations once he got to secondary school but that another student encouraged him: “She told me that I would appreciate them later—this was another student who had been through it. She was right.” In terms of accommodations, Darth found that the most effective ones were basic, such as extra time and a

quiet location to write exams. Trendy devices such as a laptop and Dragon Naturally Speaking (speech recognition software) were often a nuisance, took too long to organize, and, at times, did not work.

While in secondary school, Darth was fortunate to have a few teachers who took a special interest in him which was something he needed because Darth described wanting to drop out of school in Grade 10. At one point after a midterm test, Mark had a mark of 33% in his math course. The teacher, whom Darth described as “not well respected” said, “You have to get your shit together. I will help you out.” This teacher let Darth rewrite the test; Darth said he really discovered himself in that class. He recalled:

I was one of the few louder kids in that class and because of that he knew he couldn't keep that class under control if I started to talk whenever I felt like it. So after he helped me, I learned to respect him more and so I kind of developed a witty repartee with this teacher, which made the class bearable for me to stay there. So if the teacher will appreciate my sense of humour often I will try to use it to contribute to the lesson plan, I am pretty strategic about it.

Darth learned that he could get away with anything from this teacher as long as he did his work. Darth put in some effort in math class and his teacher would look the other way when Darth decided to use his creative side to bend rules. He described an example of bending rules: “At one point, I stole his chair and did a lap around the school using his rolling chair. It went pretty good and he wasn't mad; he kind of forgot that I left.” Darth respected this teacher, yet he felt the need to act out as a way of asserting himself among his peers. Although his behaviour seemed odd and disrespectful, he was able to cope in his math class because he trusted that his teacher accepted him as a person and wanted to help him succeed in school.

According to Donna, staying organized was a big problem for Darth. He was so analytical and self-aware that he admitted that his coping strategies involved figuring out how to “survive in school” strategically. Some of his best coping mechanisms involved learning to prioritize class work and learning how much he needed to do to “get by”— knowing that he could not do it all to the best of his ability. Darth admitted that he had not always chosen the most strategic plan when “playing the school game” and that adjusting to his workload in secondary school had been a challenge. His alternative school focused on the creation of projects instead of on practice through homework. “I have learned now how to cope with homework and

know now what homework you do and what homework you pretend to do.” For example, Darth learned that doing each math question for homework was too time-consuming so he and his teacher worked out a plan where Darth completed enough questions to demonstrate that he had grasped the concept. Darth credited his teachers in middle and secondary school with being quite supportive. His arts-based secondary school was the best possible school setting in that the teachers were flexible with their time and open to original ideas. He appreciated that his music teacher kept the music room available at all times for students who just wanted to “hang out and jam.” English was Darth’s most challenging subject and he said, “Every English teacher that I have had has helped me out in some way or another.” Whether these teachers allowed him to retake exams or made modifications to his workload, Darth had managed to get through his English courses with their help. Darth had the most respect for his communications technology teacher who inspired him with film studies and showed him how to appreciate film on an artistic level. Darth found that in elementary school the majority of his teachers were women but now that he was in secondary school he found, “the male teachers are really inspirational to me.” Once Darth was in Grade 12 and had investigated universities, he said that he was trying to get out of the habit of coasting to get a passing grade. As much as possible, he took courses where he excelled—like music and film studies—while still taking the courses that he needed to get into university. He stated, “I have an 82 average. . . . I am working for an 85 average which will involve bringing my English mark up 5%.”

**Social.** Socially, throughout elementary school Darth felt different and he did not really fit in. “I had nothing to compare it to at the time so I thought it was normal but I don’t think it was. I was one of the most unpopular kids; even the losers picked on me.” Darth explained that he had no social skills back then: “I still don’t really, but now I have friends who accept that and find it amusing. I grew up breaking taboos of society and now I do it intentionally.” Darth became very empowered socially after meeting a group of friends who were supportive of him and his quirks. He said:

All of us were quite quirky and we bonded together against the forces we thought were evil, we were proclaimed nerds and that was fun. . . we learned from each other and by the time I reached high school it wasn’t that I was trying to hide my neediness, I just moved past that stage of caring what others thought.

Darth described his experience in secondary school as one of social acceptance—a place where

being different and standing out was seen as original and interesting. In this arts-based school, “there isn’t really a social hierarchy, it is an accepting place...socially I am strange but mostly I just have fun with breaking taboos.” Darth explained that sometimes he ate lunch with people with whom he has never talked before. In school, where cliques are common, this activity provided evidence of acceptance and also of Darth’s confidence and self-awareness to create opportunities where he might make new friends. Darth said, “I am a fairly honest person I think. I don’t need to hide anything. I trust my friends and assume the best in them until they prove to me otherwise.”

When asked to describe his strengths, Darth said, “Believe it or not, I can be quite energetic and fun.” He went on to say that he liked to put his creative energy into his school work and excelled when he had the opportunity to demonstrate his understanding not through traditional means, like writing essays, but through music, story-telling, or film. His self-awareness shone through when he said, “I am creative. I am quick to catch on to concepts and slow to grasp specifics.” It occurred to me that one of Darth’s strengths was his dry sense of humour and quick wit. Darth was very analytical about his experiences and how they have shaped him as a person. He reflected that having a learning disability has made him a more creative person, “I think the more LD you are the more creative you are because you have a different take on the world.” He went on to describe that people who have learning disabilities see the world differently; yet, they think that is how the world is in reality so their perceptions of people and of situations may not be accurate. Hence, this makes communication and understanding others difficult. Darth was also gifted and had perfectionist tendencies. He became very focused on creative projects that inspired him, and, because he was quick to understand concepts, he tended to disregard school work that he felt was beneath him: “Often I don’t feel that I need to do work so I get fucked over. I am working on it but still not great at it.” Darth knew that he needed to learn to “play the game” when it came to school work. His personality was contrary to following norms, yet he understood that while he was trying to transition to his university of choice, getting the right marks meant that he had to take responsibility for his homework, studying, projects, relationships with teachers and raising his English mark—all so that he could pursue post-secondary education. He was very motivated by this transition. In addition, he had experienced support within his school setting to help him manage this transition. Darth was a self-advocate when necessary. When he received what he called a “ridiculous mark”

in English, he went to his teacher to present his case. He said, “She was being stubborn and couldn’t admit it.” A few days later his mark was raised 5%.

**Transition planning.** In terms of transition planning, Darth said that his mother was always on him. He had to create a portfolio and she would continually ask, “Have you done anything yet?” His telecommunications teacher helped him put his portfolio together. In terms of a transition plan at school, no formal meeting was held to discuss his transition. Donna described working alone to plan trips to visit universities while Darth was working with the school to get his courses finished and apply to universities. He did have an IEP with transition goals. When asked about it, he said:

Apparently. I looked at it earlier today, but I don’t know what it is to be perfectly honest. I had to sign it. I seem to recall that they asked about my plans for the future but I don’t remember anything very formal.

Throughout his education, Donna was present at IPRC meetings and active in discussions with his school counsellors. As Darth got older and gained confidence with his school program, he took the lead in picking courses that suited his interests as well as the ones that would satisfy his graduation requirements. As Darth took on some self-advocacy, Donna had less to do within the school.

Although Darth handled his transition plan in terms of completing his school program requirements, he explained that he was less organized about getting information on scholarships and bursaries. His mental energy was focused on one thing at a time, getting through his courses to get into the program. Fortunately, Donna was constantly seeking information about what he needed to go to university, from researching the benefits of different school programs, to taking him to visit the schools, to looking into OSAP. One concern for Donna related to how she would save the money to buy Darth a laptop for school. With all of the research she had done on universities and access services—even with visits to the campuses—neither Donna nor Darth had been told that, as an identified student, Darth would be eligible to receive funding from OSAP for technology as well as for tutoring services.

### **Donna and School**

Throughout Darth’s education, Donna found that his teachers in elementary school were more than happy to pass him from grade to grade without being concerned that he was not reading or writing. He had the hardest time in Grade 4. That year Darth finally got his formal

diagnosis. Donna took on a big role as advocate for him. She described a “steep learning curve.” She constantly read about learning disabilities, gifted children, and policy. Before Darth’s IPRC, she took a course offered at the LDA about IPRC meetings and IEPs. She said, “I was not impressed by the first IEP that the staff presented so I took it to a professional and after that I wrote his IEP.” Donna remarked that she had hoped that after Darth’s reassessment his Grade 4 teacher might support him more, but found that the relationship between the teacher and Darth did not improve.

As Donna described, Darth was “horribly bullied in elementary school.” Both Donna and Darth depicted those years as his worst. He had no friends and experienced problems with teachers. Darth’s self-esteem in elementary school “was the pits.” He was withdrawn from the integrated setting. Donna described him walking “with the Down’s Syndrome kid down the hall” to go to the resource room. Donna implied that this association did not help Darth’s social status not that it was the root cause.

Things changed for Darth in middle school. Donna decided to offer Darth the opportunity to change his peer group and attend an alternative school in the area. This school appealed to both Donna and Darth because of its focus on creative projects and field trips to reinforce learning. Donna said, “In middle school he thrived socially; he came home and said, ‘Mom, I eat lunch with a table of boys every day.’” Donna described his new friends as “a group of delightful boys.” Donna said that Darth, academically, really enjoyed this school and worked very hard. About Darth’s middle school experience, Donna recalled:

It was amazing to see how happy he was in Grade 7 and 8. I went to his resource teachers with pages of what he needed and they paid attention and were cooperative with me. He sat in the front desk in every class and his teachers would talk with each other about his needs.

This school did not withdraw their special needs students; instead, the special education teacher helped the teachers and students to integrate.

Then, when it came time to choose a secondary school, he decided to apply to a local but elite arts-based school. Donna explained how badly he wanted to attend this school. “All he did was go to his middle school, do his after school activities and then he would prepare for his applications” to this elite arts school. His perseverance paid off and he was accepted.

It was different once he got to secondary school; Donna received a letter of concern each

year. She explained:

He was very close in Grade 9 to dropping out of school. In Grade 10, he got 33 in math but that teacher got into his head and into his heart and he ended up getting 100 percent on his summative for that course.

Darth passed each year. In Grade 12, he had more opportunity to pick courses that he enjoyed and in which he could excel. Donna firmly believed that even though this school was challenging, “if he wasn’t in [an arts-based school] he wouldn’t be in school at all.” Part of the reason for this was that this school did not have many cliques and focused on the arts. He did not have the social pressure that he felt in elementary school.

Donna made the point that he was not choosing to attend a university based on where his friends went; but, in this case, having a few friends around him would be nice. Donna said, “I think he will need support from us, his family. All of the factors have come together nicely.” Darth was hoping to be accepted to a school one hour from his home town. Donna was very practical about Darth’s choice to go to film school. She said, “It would be so neat if he succeeded and he doesn’t need to be famous but it would be great for him to do what he wants and be satisfied.” Donna was a mother who was in tune with who her son was and what he needed to be happy.

Donna explained that in terms of her time and the effects on her family life, supporting Darth took a lot of time, energy, and resources both emotional and financial. One of Darth’s psychologists had said to her early on, “Don’t worry about his academics—that is up to his teachers; you worry about his self-esteem.” Donna took that advice to heart and tried to encourage Darth to participate in activities that he was passionate about. On the other hand, Donna experienced frustration with many of his teachers. She said, “I found that the school focused on his weaknesses and only worked on correcting those. They were not working on his strengths.” This was one of the reasons why Donna was interested in the alternative middle school—to place him into a program that suited his strengths:

With the research I did I learned that my kid had a high risk of dropping out and of suicide; those things drove me. I worked like crazy, got him a tutor, but I really paid attention to his gifted side and gave him opportunities to work toward them.

Whenever Darth experienced difficulty, Donna found school or extra-curricular programs to put him into at her own expense. In summer, Darth attended a film studies camp. Donna felt it was

important to give him all of the creative outlets and opportunities she could.

In terms of advocacy, Donna described herself as “a huge advocate” and thought that some specific skills really enhanced her efforts. She said:

I am good at research around advocacy. I can analyze a system and see the strengths and weaknesses in it. This helps so that I can have realistic expectations about what the system can do for us and not flail around when what we want is beyond their capacity.

Donna also confessed that she thought she had similar learning problems, ones that were never diagnosed. She said, “I understand his learning issues, and when I see parents who don’t understand, it hinders progress and puts strain on the relationships among the family.” Donna spent a great amount of time attending support groups and talking to parents about their struggles:

Once you have a kid with LD you are opened up to a world of parents. It has taken me into a whole different area in my life. I am a good resource in the community—lots of people come to me to talk about issues.

In terms of the actual diagnosis and label of LD, Donna described that hearing it “was really painful. It is such an inappropriate term. It should be called a learning difference because people would accept that label more readily.” She made the point that in our culture *difference* can be celebrated but the term *disability* has no positive associations. In terms of how Donna viewed her role as an advocate, she said:

I will always be there to provide support in any way that he needs. But now he needs to do the research to find the supports and opportunities. I can give him advice, but as he gets older it becomes his responsibility.

### **Summary of Themes using Systems Theory**

In terms of Darth’s transition plans, his interactions within each ecological system—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem—have produced specific themes. These themes are detailed below.

#### **Microsystem**

In terms of his relationships with both parents, Darth said that at times, “My mom and I have kind of a love-hate relationship. The way she tries to help me, I don’t really appreciate it for some reason. Sometimes she triggers something in me that makes me mad.” He explained that he did not think he would have been so reliant on his mother had he not had learning problems. It

seemed to me that, this friction that he felt with her at times developed because of her over-protective behaviour towards him. One thing they fought about was him getting a job. She thought any job would be good for him but he was holding out for a job in a trendy guitar shop that he explained “never hires”. Darth has had little work experience, mainly volunteer work. Donna admitted that this was one short fall that she worried about, but when making the choice, she always wanted him to pursue social activities to build his confidence. Darth described his mother as being his most important source of support. He confided a lot in her and Donna had always been focused on giving him any supports that she could. Donna was his primary caregiver and took on the majority of the financial burden. I saw her as a mother who tried to provide him with as many opportunities as possible and who sacrificed things for herself to give him these experiences. Darth said, “She introduced me to everything she could: I took art courses, I went to concerts, cooking classes, lectures, film schools, music and swimming lessons. Some of these really worked, some I really hated.”

When asked about his father, Darth said, “My dad and I have a pretty good relationship. We have similar taste in movies. He isn’t a very emotional person and he is really analytical and I’m like that too.” Darth said he prefers spending time with his father over his mother because he sees his father less often. He also described their rules as being opposite, “My dad is horrified that I might drink and my mom just hopes that I will drink responsibly.”

In terms of his transition plan, it seemed that his mother and he created a plan and the school was aware of it. Darth planned to complete an extra year of secondary school—a “victory lap” to make sure that his marks were sufficient to gain him acceptance into the study of film production at a prestigious Canadian university. As well, by waiting an extra year he would be able to go with a few friends. An alternate plan was also in place: “wherever I can get in.” Darth said, “If I don’t go to university my mom will kill me.” As Donna and Darth explained, both parents have university educations and work for the government, so the expectation set in their household was that university was what to do after secondary school. Donna always explained to Darth that “there is a lot of value in doing a trade,” but as she watched Darth grow into an eccentric, creative, philosophical individual she knew that university would be the best fit for him. Socially, Donna and Darth also hoped for acceptance to a local university because he would be relatively close to home and Darth had two best friends who were planning to attend school in the same city. Both recognized the importance of Darth having a social network. His few friends

have allowed Darth to find and to accept himself. He stated, “My friends who had figured out how to walk a line between bending rules and keeping people happy helped me figure out who I was in middle school.” He respected two friends for being able to “distance themselves from ‘teendom.’” Donna and Darth have talked a great deal about his career options. Donna was supportive of his desire to go into the film industry. She supported him emotionally and financially in his film projects and wanted him to find a career that he would enjoy. She also encouraged Darth to look at teaching as an option; Darth was open to that as a final plan once he has attempted a career in film. Darth was well informed about the numbers of years of education he would need and the prominent universities where he would find the most success. For example, Darth explained that he would need to complete a master’s degree and he had identified the school that would be able to launch his career.

### **Mesosystem**

Donna was very motivated to get a diagnosis for Darth because she knew that something was wrong. She learned the benefits of a private diagnosis, “otherwise he would have been graduating before he got any supports.” Donna felt generally that his teachers in middle and secondary school had been supportive, a relief after disappointing elementary school years. In secondary school, Donna found that his special education teacher was good at communicating with his teachers and gave him the services that best suited his needs. Donna found she did not have to be present in the school to advocate for him. In terms of accommodations, Darth got extra time on projects and exams and a quiet room in which to work. It is clear that at this stage in his education Donna felt comfortable with what the school was doing for Darth. She said:

His special education teacher is wonderful; she keeps me informed. There may be a transition plan but I don’t know about one formally. I am in contact with her and she knows what we have planned for him in terms of a university education.

Donna went on to say, “We have a transition plan in place but it is not formal.”

### **Exosystem**

Darth was an only child whose parents divorced when he was in Grade 9. He said he was unsure how that has impacted him. He saw his father every other weekend. Donna said that her experience with Darth has made her more compassionate. According to Donna, Darth’s father was not as involved in Darth’s schooling or with advocacy. Donna made the point that there was a lot of different stress within the family and that having a child with challenges did not cause the

split. Donna said of their divorce, “I did it all on my own—I was basically a single parent. It was not Darth’s LD, I picked a lousy person to have a relationship with.” It seemed to me that Donna showed some resentment toward Darth’s father. It was clear that Donna felt the emotional and financial burden of being a single parent. She did say that Darth and she were very close and that all of these experiences had made them closer. In terms of transition planning, both parents raised Darth with the expectation that he would attend university. He was told this when he was in Kindergarten; during his diagnosis in Grade 4, Donna informed the psychologist that university would be his goal.

### **Macrosystem**

Darth was very interested in music and film. He described the Coen brothers as inspirational to him. He said, “Since I was two I wanted to be a film maker. Before I watched movies I wanted to make movies.” He explained that he liked that a movie could create dialogue and could be controversial without having any controversial content. Darth said he was influenced a great deal by pop culture. He took a film course, one that Donna found for him in the summer of Grade 9 and 10, with a teacher whom he really respected. He said, “The guy was the coolest ever. It was one of the few places I felt I really fit in. That experience solidified that I would be a film maker.”

Although Darth felt that his learning disability disadvantaged him socially and made him somewhat distrusting of people, he said,

having had to work hard at different points in my life makes me know what I am capable of. I don’t think I would enjoy life as much if I didn’t have it. The most brilliant people in our world, Leonardo DaVinci and Albert Einstein, had to deal with it. I think that creativity and LD go hand in hand. Creative people have to be kind of weird and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

In Darth’s words, the problem was not having a learning disability but with the stigma of the label: “I think that the label is harsh. I think that everything that is different is seen as lesser.” He described it as more of a societal problem.

### **Summary**

It appeared to me that part of the reason for Darth’s success was that he was able to embrace the qualities that made him different. Furthermore, his mother was, in my opinion, a

strong advocate who allowed him to grow into a creative individual by encouraging and funding his interests. Donna was able to look at his educational program and to make changes to it when it no longer suited him. School placement was key for Darth. Both Darth and Donna said that he would have dropped out without his keen interest in his arts education. Academic and social challenges were faced and overcome. In my opinion one of the greatest lessons Darth learned was to accept his learning disability as a facilitator that enabled him to excel in his creative pursuits.

## Chapter 7 - Cardinal Family

The caged bird sings with a fearful trill of things unknown but longed for still  
and his tune is heard on the distant hill for the caged bird sings of freedom.

--Maya Angelou

Mary, a 17-year-old student in secondary school, was diagnosed with a learning disability in Grade 11. Mary contacted me with her interest in participating in this study and after our first conversation I found her to be a vivacious and determined individual, ready to take on the world. She was very interested in learning about her relatively recent diagnosis of LD, as well, she was very motivated to share her story and to contribute to research. Mary's mother, Eva, a teacher, had suspected that Mary had learning difficulties while in elementary school. Although her grades and performance were average, Mary struggled with spelling and math and began to have anxiety attacks. After requesting a psychological assessment, Eva was told that Mary was not low enough academically to qualify for assessment by the school psychologist. By Grade 8, Mary had developed both depression and a severe anxiety disorder and had attempted suicide. Equipped with a doctor's note, Eva had the school implement a few accommodations for Mary's anxiety disorder. She was allowed to have extra time on tests and assignments, she was exempt from being penalized for poor spelling, and she was allowed a quiet space to work when needed. Mary found elementary school a very negative experience; but once she reached high school, she found more support among the teachers. Her anxiety disorder opened the door to more accommodations and the school personnel agreed to have her tested by the school psychologist. Mary's assessment began in Grade 10; she was diagnosed with a LD and had her first IPRC in Grade 11. Mary described the process of finally getting a diagnosis and accommodations as positive and necessary to her educational and emotional well-being, but said that "getting to that point had been a struggle."

Mary was very close to her mother but she indicated that negative relationships at home with her father and brother contributed to low self-confidence. Moreover, in school: "I felt I was stupid. I was made to believe I was stupid. Kids told me that I was stupid. In Grade 6, I took 6 Tylenols. It just got to the point where I didn't care." Grade 6 was Mary's worst year. Her father, Jim, who had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, was very verbally abusive toward her causing conflict in the home. Mary's brother, Robert, also had bipolar tendencies and attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity (ADHD); both disorders contributed to a stressful climate at

home. Eva often found herself in the middle of fights between her two children as well as between her children and her husband. Mary did not trust or respect either her father or her brother. She said the “fighting has really affected me. I am really protective of my mother so I can't handle people fighting with her.” Mary and Robert were not close and were very competitive with each other. Mary, Eva, and Robert agreed to be interviewed for this study but Jim was not interested in participating.

### **Mary and School**

Eva had noticed that Mary was struggling in Grade 1: “Her writing was horrible and she couldn't spell.” At the time, Eva was a teacher in Mary's school and found that her status as an insider was not helpful. She explained to Mary's teacher that, although it looked like Mary was learning along with the other children, she had developed coping strategies to disguise her inability to read or write. Eva's colleagues had been confident that with time Mary would improve her literacy skills. In Grade 2, she was put on an adapted literacy program but improved only slightly. Eva said, “I tried to help her at home with phonics games but nothing really helped her to make a big improvement.” By Grade 5, math was a problem for Mary and she had started to withdraw socially because she was being ridiculed by her peers. Meanwhile, her teachers insisted that she was not experiencing severe enough deficiencies to qualify for testing. Each year Eva presented her case to the principal but her request was refused. Mary had been achieving Bs and Cs, “so they were not concerned.”

Mary became more and more withdrawn and unhappy in school. She was afraid to bring home test results fearing ridicule at home by her parents, who, at this point, believed that she was not working hard enough. In Grade 6, Mary took several pills in an attempt to hurt herself. This action proved to be a turning point for Eva: “The school was no help to me so I wrote a letter to the school stating the history of what happened. I did my own research and I found that Mary could have accommodations without a diagnosis.” Eva then began to look outside the school for help. She took Mary to a doctor who discovered that she had developed an anxiety disorder. According to Eva, with this diagnosis the school became more willing to accommodate: Eva said, “When you put something in writing, it holds some weight.” After the school began to give Mary accommodations for her anxiety disorder, she experienced some success and less stress in school.

Mary found more support once she entered high school. Her counsellor, subject teachers,

and resource teacher agreed to observe Mary's academic progress for one year and to test her if they found deficits. During Grade 10, the school agreed to have Mary tested. Eva recalled that "the school's core resource teacher tested her and found discrepancies and so did the school psychologist. They concluded that she had a learning disability." The new diagnosis entitled Mary to more accommodations. The school gave her assistive devices for spelling, they trained her on word recognition and word prediction software, and, to help her visual memory, they provided a word bank that she was allowed to take into exams to cue her memory. According to Mary, her secondary school experience was successful and teachers, for the most part, were accommodating. In terms of support, Mary had access to the school psychologist, who was in the school once a week, and she saw a guidance counsellor when needed. Mary's strongest coping strategy was her ability to self-advocate. Eva said, "She speaks up for her rights; she is very good at it. She has even started her own blog about life as a student with LD." Mary's ability to self-advocate meant that she relied less on her mother to advocate.

**Social.** It seemed to me that secondary school was also a turning point socially. Mary described Grade 6 and 7 as her worst years. Then anxiety attacks had begun and socially, she said, "I didn't care. I didn't fit in so I disguised myself in oversized, tomboy clothes. I think it reflected how I was feeling inside." Having seen Mary's depression, Eva had taken control and made some changes designed to improve Mary's self-esteem. Eva took Mary to get her hair styled, bought her a new wardrobe, and forced Mary to join sports teams in order to make new friends. At the time, according to Mary and Eva, Mary's circle of friends may have contributed to her poor self-esteem. In secondary school, Mary became involved with peers who valued school and worked hard to achieve. She began to enjoy school, and, after her diagnosis in Grade 10, she grew very confident as a student. Mary surrounded herself with other friends who worked "for that extra 5%." She described herself as being more social, that she felt good about herself. Mary said that she strove to confront all of her fears, pushing herself to do things that she once feared—such as entering speech contests and making presentations about her experiences having a learning disability. She became very self-aware:

I compensated a lot for my problems—like I am in the highest percentile for most categories. But my working memory is not there at all; it is the lowest percentile. My work ethic is great; it has kept me going.

**School Supports.** About her accommodations, Mary said, “I know that I can do without them if I pushed myself but I would compromise the quality of my work.” Mary said that she used the resource room because she felt more comfortable working there than in the classroom. However, at times she encountered a few teachers who passed judgment on her when she chose to use those services. Eva thought that assistive devices had been necessary for Mary:

Without them she would be lost. She wouldn't write. She has started to use a microphone to tape her ideas and that is working out well for her. The devices are wonderful and the ministry encourages you to use them but it's the teachers and administration that put up the roadblocks.

In school, Mary trusted a few teachers because they were optimistic and supportive. Mary noted her respect for her English teacher who pushed her to work harder on her writing skills: “I see now that she was a very good teacher.” Mary recalled those teachers who had shown care:

As hard as Grade 7 was, I knew that she [the teacher] cared about me and that is the biggest thing, knowing that a teacher cares and they actually take the time to talk to you and find out what is wrong.

These supportive interactions were important in helping Mary develop self-confidence.

**Transition Planning.** Mary planned to transition to university in an undergraduate business program and then go on to law school. Mary's contingency plan—if she was not accepted to a law school—was to take accounting. She knew that her business degree could also lead to a career in accounting. It appeared to me that her transition plan was focused on keeping options open. As a last resort, Mary had been receptive to becoming a teacher; she wanted to work with exceptional students. Interestingly, her brother, Robert, was registered at the same university that Mary had decided to attend. About his role in her transition, Robert said:

Yes, I will have a role in her transition because she will be going to the same university as I am and I don't think that is a coincidence. I am a support for her. If she has a problem she will come to me. She doesn't come to me a lot; I don't know why because I have taken all the courses before. She comes to me as a last resort because she wants to do it herself.

When asked if Robert was a factor in her choice of university, Mary replied, “I hear that this school is good at taking care of people with learning disabilities. The fact that my brother is going there is not a motivator.” Mary made it clear that she did not rely on her brother for

support. Her drive to attend university rather than college came from other family members whom she respected. “College has never been an option. My aunts and uncles who have great jobs all went to university. I have never seen college as somewhere that I would want to go.” Although Mary’s mother went to university, her father did not complete high school. The children saw how physically demanding and unrewarding their father’s work was; as a result, they were motivated to attend university in order to pursue a professional career. Robert said:

My dad never finished high school. It is not that he says anything but you can see it in him. He repairs freight trains for CN and today he was dead tired. He hates his job. So we have been shown what not going to university or getting a good job means.

Mary remarked, “Maybe I would not have been as ambitious as I am if I didn’t struggle so much when I was younger. I think it motivated me even more than my mother’s expectations of me.”

Mary was driven to the point of obsession:

My mom says, ‘What is wrong with an 80%?’ and it gets me mad. I work hard for my 85%. I don’t want it to drop to an 84%. I won’t accept that. If I can achieve a 90% with hard work, why wouldn’t I?

Mary worked equally hard to improve her areas of weakness as her areas of strength. Math had always been a struggle for her. She was challenged to prove to herself that she could overcome anything she perceived as a personal weakness. She stated:

When I was diagnosed, the psychologist said, “You will never be great in math.” I was tutored in math during the summer and I did pretty good—an 84%. Now I am applying to take calculus just to see if I can do it.

She pushed herself so that she would be sure to have the prerequisite courses for her chosen university program. She was very aware of not wanting to limit any career opportunities. Mary knew, for example, that she would need to study math in university as part of any business program. According to Mary, her secondary school program created her interest in a career related to business. She studied law in Grades 10 and 11 and accounting in Grades 11 and 12 and went to a chartered accountant conference organized through her school. These goals for her future really inspired her to work hard to achieve high grades. Mary was a very goal-oriented person: “I am excited to go to university. I am actually graduating a semester early. Nothing is holding me back.” During the summer, she worked two jobs, took an online course, and planned to spend one week at a local university participating in “The Law Experience.” Often, Eva had to

encourage Mary to take a break from academics to spend time with her friends. Eva said, “She is very determined with her work. Her friends call and say, ‘We haven’t seen you.’ Sometimes I’m surprised she doesn’t pass out from exhaustion.”

Career counselling was one area in which Mary had very little guidance from her school. Mary and Eva both mentioned that Mary would have benefited from a co-operative education placement. However, Mary’s secondary school did not offer this program to students in the academic stream. Eva reflected that Mary “would love to do a co-op placement in an accounting or law firm, and I was surprised that none of those opportunities were offered to her.” When Mary asked for a co-operative education placement, she was told that “it was for kids who don’t do anything in school. It is for troubled kids who don’t come to school.” Mary fast-tracked through secondary school in order to graduate a semester early and decided to go to college for a semester before she started university to get a certificate. She said, “I want to learn about a lot of things. I can’t start university early, so college is the only thing left for me to do. I want to get a lot of credentials. I find it fun. It’s a new challenge.”

It appeared to me that the school was not actively involved in guiding the process of a formal transition plan. Mary and her mother said that the transition plan was to be developed in September of her Grade 12 year, with input from Mary, her guidance counsellor, and her resource teacher. Throughout secondary school, Mary informed her teachers and counsellors that she planned to attend university to ensure that her academic program would reflect that goal. Eva took the lead in gathering literature about possible post-secondary institutions and made appointments for visits and consultations with counsellors at the different universities. Mary understood the benefits of using accommodations: they helped her to be successful by relieving the anxiety that came from time constraints and distractions during exams. When she transitioned to university, she planned to register with access services.

### **Eva and School**

Eva ran into obstacles at both the school and board level. She recalled: “The school board told me to go through the school and because I am part of the teacher’s federation, I had to put things in writing. Being a teacher was a handicap.” The support promised at the board level during Mary’s IPRC meeting did not materialize at the school:

They told me that she would get as much time as she needed to complete exams and that she would get a laptop to use in class. Then you go to the school and they say no. I wish I

had gone into that IPRC with a microphone.

Eva purchased the assistive devices Mary needed because the school would not provide them. These expenses caused a financial drain on the family. Unfortunately, the laptop and tape recorder were stolen while at school. The school took no responsibility to help Mary care for the items because the school had not provided them. Eva said:

This is where the system fails the child. It was supposed to provide what the child needs to get a successful education. The board and ministry highlight student's success but what do they do for LD? You get so tired of fighting, as a parent you really do.

Eva was happy when Mary was finally diagnosed; she described it as "a sense of relief." She remarked, "It is so unfair when it comes to LD kids; the school holds back services until the kids are three years behind in school. My daughter didn't get that far behind because she learned to compensate." Mary's school experience became enjoyable once she received services from the school. Mary appreciated having the label *learning disability* because she experienced how hard it was to achieve in school without the supports that came with the label. Mary reflected: "I see the change in myself—when I had the label and when I didn't have it. I know now that I was not stupid, I was working at a disadvantage." As an advocate, Eva stated that her role was

to support [Mary] and to guide her and to tell her that she can do whatever she sets her mind to doing, but I tell you it has been quite the fight. As a teacher, I only saw things from one perspective but now being a parent of a child with a learning disability, I see the other side and I tell you the pendulum is swinging too far to the left.

When asked about her role in Mary's education now that Mary could self-advocate, Eva said:

I will continue to guide her when she comes to me. I am scheduled to retire in two years and I want to audit some courses at her university because I want to do things to show her that I am a life-long learner. I want to be a role model for her.

### **Summary of Themes using Systems Theory**

In terms of Mary transition plans, her interactions within each ecological system—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem—have produced specific themes. These themes are detailed below.

#### **Microsystem**

In terms of relationships with her family, It appeared to me that Mary struggled over the years with taunting at home. Her brother and her father made comments to her about being

dumb. Eva explained that Mary's father did not understand learning disabilities. Eva recalled that he once suggested that Mary attend a special school. Eva continued, "We fight about the way that he bullies her and, being her mom, I do go to her rescue." Eva believed that he had more patience with Mary after her diagnosis. Unfortunately, although Mary said she loved her father, she remembered his hurtful words and she did not respect him. She did not go to him for advice and was motivated to do well to prove herself to him.

Mary's relationship with Robert was very strained as well. He admitted that until Mary was diagnosed, he just thought that she wasn't as smart as other people because there were things that came to him really easily and he couldn't understand why she was having problems. It seemed that much of the tension between them came from competition. Eva recalled that, over the years, Robert had been jealous of the extra time she gave to Mary, "the difference is that she is open to getting help and he is not." He was quiet and kept to himself, whereas Mary was vocal and open and needed to talk out her anxiety issues with someone. Eva noted, "Sometimes I feel that I am an acrobat walking a fine line. They both have a diagnosis; my son has ADHD, but I do go to Mary a lot." Eva said that Mary was more compromising while Robert was less understanding and more resentful of the time she spent helping Mary.

When Mary was asked where she sought advice, she indicated that she looked to her mother. She said:

I am sure that on an emotional level my father and brother have impacted me negatively. So, I don't ask my dad's opinion about my education or what I do and I don't care what my brother thinks. My mom creates the emotional stability for me.

Eva noted that over the last few years the family as a unit was getting along better. Eva thought that Mary's new understanding of learning disabilities created confidence in her own abilities and inspired her to educate others.

In terms of school support, both Mary and Eva felt that the late diagnosis was the root of many of Mary's self-esteem issues. Mary was happy in secondary school, experiencing success both socially and academically. She looked to some teachers as role models; however, a few did not understand her needs and forced her to self-advocate. Mary recalled that one teacher asked, "If you have a learning disability, what are you doing in an academic course?" Eva said, "At present Mary doesn't really trust her counsellors because they told her to take college-level math." Mary refused the advice and, with the help of a tutor, she ended up doing well. When her

counsellors suggested that she take college-level English courses, Mary had to remind them that she was planning to attend university and needed academic credits. Her counsellor's advice and Mary's transition goals seemed to have no connection. Fortunately, she was aware and focused on her transition goals because if she had taken the advice of her counsellors, she may not have completed the appropriate prerequisites for a university program.

### **Mesosystem**

It seemed to me that the extra attention given to Mary created a climate of friction between other members in the home. Eva described the friction between Jim and her as follows:

My husband really doesn't understand it. For example, Mary is disorganized about her room and he gets after her about it. I agree it should be tidy but he should also know that it is a characteristic of her learning disability, so give her strategies—don't bully her."

Robert said that generally his relationship with his mother was good:

We have occasional arguments but I spend a lot of time with my mom. With my dad it is okay at times and sometimes it is not okay. He has bipolar disorder and can lash out and it is usually at my mom or me. I try to calm everyone down when we are all fighting.

The family thought that Jim struggled with learning problems and that he had been belittled as a child for his learning problems—situations leading to his emotional issues.

Robert was a year older than Mary. Eva said that Robert's transition to university was much harder because ADHD is not a recognized exceptionality; therefore, he was not able to obtain services at university. It appeared to me that his own competitive feelings made him feel inadequate at times. Mary thought of him as a bully but Robert described his competitive nature as his way of trying to build himself up to Mary. Robert asserted, "I am just as hard on myself. I also hold high standards for myself. She works so hard; I can't work the way that she does."

### **Exosystem**

Mary looked at her experience with a late diagnosis of LD as having both negative and positive effects on her success. Her negative feelings about herself resulted, for the most part, from not understanding her lack of success in school. Her diagnosis reassured her that she was both smart and capable. She wanted to prove this to herself and to others:

I really self-advocate. If someone doesn't follow my I.E.P or if they give me a hard time, I tell them what I need and that they have to give it to me. I tell my teachers, here is my dream, I want to get there, what do I need to do to get there?

Mary wanted to advocate for others with similar experiences “I feel like I have a learning disability for a reason and that there is a reason that I have been diagnosed.” Mary was very interested in law and in issues of right and wrong. When she read that legal action could be taken when ministry standards were not followed, she looked into her own educational history, her report cards, and assessments: “I don’t want to sue anyone, but I do feel that my negative experiences were a result of a missed diagnosis.” She wanted to learn as much as she could about her rights in order to inform others.

### **Macrosystem**

It appeared to me that family support was the largest factor in the transition decisions for Mary. Members of her mother’s family have university degrees and professional careers; they have always encouraged Mary to attend university. Mary looked up to her uncle, a civil engineer and vice president of the company where he worked, and said that every time she went to his house she came home “feeling inspired.” Mary also looked up to her aunt a medical assistant, and her cousin, a lawyer. As well, Mary surrounded herself with friends who “strive to achieve that extra 5%.” Having friends who shared her ambitions to attend higher education in professional programs was a large motivator.

However, Mary continued to struggle emotionally. It was evident by her descriptions that being diagnosed later in her education negatively affected her confidence and self-esteem. Eva asserted,

I don’t want her giving up on herself. I want her to achieve her goals, whatever they may be. I want her to trust herself and to trust what she feels inside because it is right and sometimes she doubts it.

Eva made the point that when you are made to believe that you are not smart, how do you know that what you feel and believe is right?

### **Summary**

In terms of the characteristics that helped Mary during her transition to university, she was very goal directed, determined, and able to stand up for herself through self-advocacy. However, she was also pessimistic and negative about herself and had difficulty putting past issues behind her. Her late diagnosis of LD negatively affected her self-esteem. For the future, Mary had the ability and the skills to achieve her goals. She and her mother ensured that the right tools were in place at the school level to transition successfully to university. Monitoring and

advocating for accommodations was important in making sure that all requirements were met.

At the microsystem level, each member of her family system had both positive and negative influences on her ability to transition. It seemed to me that her mother acted as her truest advocate and gave her the most guidance during this process. Interactions that Mary had with both her father and her brother were characterized by Mary as negative and demoralizing, however, the results of these interactions may have been the catalyst that pushed her to higher levels of achievement. At the meso-, exo-, and macrosystem levels, her interactions with extended family members and with supportive teachers exposed her to adults whom she wished to emulate. The life experiences of these adults were a positive influence, exposing Mary to career options that otherwise she may not have considered. Lastly, finding a supportive and like-minded peer group facilitated happiness in school, healthy competition to strive for high grades, support in forming study groups, and a platform from which to explore career and education options.

## Chapter 8 - Magpie Family

Along the road the Magpies walk with hands in pockets, left and right.

They tilt their heads, and stroll and talk. In their well-fitted black and white.

They look like certain gentleman who seem most nonchalant and wise

--Judith Wright

Vincent was 22 years old at the time of the interview; he was diagnosed with dyslexia at age 10. He came across as very quiet, easy going and kind. Although it was his mother who initially asked him to participate in this research, he was accommodating in his schedule to meet with me and he was open in his responses. He told me that reading and writing were his greatest difficulties while in school. He said his biggest problem was “the inability to read something and process it and put my thoughts into words on paper. I can tell you what I want to say but I can’t write it down.” Vincent excelled in work that he could do with his hands. He came from a family of five. His parents have been married for 24 years. His father, Garrett, was a truck driver and his mother, Grace, worked in a factory. He had two younger siblings, Gwyneth and Alistair; all three siblings were a year and a half apart in age. Vincent was shy and modest when he talked about his school and work experiences. In contrast, his parents, Garrett and Grace, were very demonstrative and proud of what he had accomplished. His school experiences and employment accomplishments seemed to serve as a model in this family for what the younger siblings should strive to accomplish.

Vincent described his learning problems thus:

If someone read something to me I can memorize it and analyze it in my head and then be able to answer questions. But if someone asked me to read and answer a question about what I read, I couldn’t do it.

He went on to say that he relied on auditory instruction from teachers in order to understand all instructions and information. He said,

It is funny how people adapt to situations. Studying never helped me because you have all these notes and you have to read them and study them. I couldn’t do that. Reading gave me a headache I never could understand anything I read.

He had to rely solely on his teacher’s ability to instruct orally in order to function in the classroom because he didn’t have the ability to read for comprehension or to study for understanding. His memory became a powerful tool to help him cope.

## Vincent and Grace

Grace spoke of Vincent with pride, respect, and love. She was proud of his accomplishments in his school and in his work and she respected his ability to turn his talent for working with his hands into a powerful tool that he could use to find fulfilling work. Vincent had dyslexia and recalled English classes “as the worst.” He described creative writing, reading novels and writing book reports as extremely difficult activities for him. He said,

I do good with math and science and the hands-on stuff. I could do the math because I could remember the formulas to do the writing problems but the verbs and nouns—I still don’t know what that stuff is.

He was able to disguise his reading difficulty by memorizing each book that was read to him. He used the pictures and recalled the text from previous readings so that his inability to read went unnoticed by his parents and teachers until Grade 2, when he began to experience migraines and unhappiness in school. His mother, Grace, described the situation: “I felt bad that I didn’t catch it. I felt guilty. He was reading these books but it was all by memory; you could tell him something and he would recite it back to you.”

Grace described Vincent as a boy who “kept things inside”; she knew that he was unhappy in school when he came home with migraines, feeling exhausted. When he was in Grade 2, his teacher told Grace that they wanted to have Vincent assessed by the school psychologist. Initially, Grace did not understand what the assessment meant and she was worried that the teacher was judging her and Garrett’s ability to parent. Her sister in-law was able to explain the benefits of what a psychological assessment could do for Vincent. After she understood, she said:

I had no feeling about the label *LD*. I was relieved that Vincent would get help and that he would not have to struggle and that his future teachers would be made aware of his needs, so it was a relief actually.

Grace recalled, “Vincent and I worked a lot together on getting what was in his head on to paper.” With Garrett spending weekdays on the road, Grace became the primary caregiver of her children, the one who spent the time with Vincent helping him with one-on-one tutoring. She explained, “We spent hours at night working on assignments and homework.” Vincent became more settled and comfortable in school, but occasionally needed the support of his mother. She remembered, “Even when he went to write his apprentice exam a few years ago, I had to be

ready; I read the book and put it into my own words and I had to explain it to him.”

Though not wealthy, Grace and Garrett were generous when it came to investing financially in their children’s education. They bought Vincent a personal computer because he was not a strong enough writer to be able to keep up with the demands of his school work. They look at Vincent’s diagnosis as a positive experience that gave them information as to his strengths and weaknesses. It helped them navigate Vincent through his school program in a way that would lead him into a career path where he could be successful.

### **Vincent and School**

Vincent’s early memories of his school experiences were negative. Although he recalled having “really good teachers” and “small class sizes” in Kindergarten and Grade 1, he stated, “I found school hard.” His difficulty was not with teachers or with the social atmosphere at the school—it was with the work. Grade 3 was a very trying year for Vincent. He said, “I found Grade 3 testing really stressful. Every day I came home with a headache and was exhausted and I didn’t want to go to school the next day. I just hated it!” Vincent described having to work through the Grade 3 provincial literacy and numeracy tests in the special education room and not being able to ask for clarification of the questions. He said, “I understand when I have things read to me, not when I read them myself, so it was very frustrating.” The one accommodation that was made for Vincent during the Grade 3 testing was the agreement that his scores would not be included in the package that was sent to the Ministry of Education.

**School Supports.** Another negative school experience came from the feeling of being singled out when he left the classroom for remedial assistance. Vincent reflected:

It is hard; they put you in a group of eight kids. Each person was at a different level and they have to give the neediest one the most attention. I was feeling like why wasn’t I in the classroom?

As he progressed through school, Vincent explained that he needed less resource time and remedial assistance. He said, “The farther I got the less help I asked for.” In secondary school, he chose to write his exams in the gym with the other students. In terms of resource help, he asserted, “I didn’t need resource help and I didn’t want it.” He recognized that he might have been better off being supported by his teacher in the classroom and not withdrawn in front of his peers, missing classroom activities that might have helped to build peer friendships in elementary school. Vincent was allowed to write tests in a quiet room with a 50% increase in time and

extensions on projects, but what he really wanted and required was the choice to decline these services when he felt they were not necessary. He recalled:

In elementary school they didn't give you a choice, you had to go into the room to get the support. I feel like you should have the choice to ask for help if you want it. I didn't want to be excluded. I didn't want to be taken away from my friends to sit alone in a room.

Vincent hit his stride once he began secondary school. There, he noted, "You can go into the academic stuff or you can do the workplace stuff—the stuff that applies to the real world." Vincent excelled in his technical classes and picked up as many hands-on classes as he could. He explained:

I didn't have to sit in a chair all day while I was in school, I could get up and take breaks and take something apart and that is what I do now. I got to see that if I learned how to do this stuff, that this is what I could be doing in the future.

It appeared to me that Vincent was also a gentle person, kind, obedient, and hard working. These qualities allowed him to form bonds with certain teachers. In particular, both Vincent's co-operative education and technical teachers advocated for him, gave him career advice, and acted as role models. His co-operative education teacher arranged a placement for Vincent with a personal friend and was confident in Vincent's ability to work with his hands and to be professional. Vincent's technical teacher encouraged him to take as many technical classes as possible and created opportunities for him to earn a credit as a peer tutor. This opportunity gave Vincent the chance to teach other students and gain experience as a leader. Vincent described the important role that his technical teacher had in his transition:

My tech teacher, he has an LD too, he understood and he helped me and he pointed me onto my career path. He told me that I am really good at this and that I need to continue with this. I would do my classes with him and then I would stay with him and help him with his other classes. He wanted me to learn as much as I could. He got me my co-op job. In Grade 12, I passed with honours and a proficiency award as well as a tech grant and he helped me with that.

In addition to his co-operative education experience in school, Vincent also had a job working on a farm. His parents encouraged him, at age 14, to take on the responsibility of holding down a job. Because he lived in a rural area, he had an opportunity to work on a farm. Vincent worked 20 to 30 hours a week before and after school. He explained: "I would get up at 5:30 on the

weekend to milk and go back in the evening.” He also participated in haying during the summer months. Grace described this job as one that “made him learn about hard work and how important it is to be reliable.” At 18, Vincent was offered a paid, weekend job with the company where he was doing his co-operative education placement. This part-time job led to full-time employment with the company as well as an apprenticeship. According to Grace, his technical teacher encouraged him to do an apprenticeship. When Vincent left the farm, Garrett and Grace made sure that their younger son, Alistair, took over this job to try to instill in him a similar work ethic.

**Transition Planning.** In terms of his transition into this apprenticeship, Vincent spoke about the types of supports he required at the college level to complete his courses. He explained:

I didn't disclose my LD. I don't feel that I need the support. It hasn't affected me at this level. The teachers, they know that we're not there to be English professors. We have a mechanic teaching us mechanics. Our teacher knows that we don't have the English skills, so the teachers try to teach one subject three different ways so that everyone in the class can get it. That is why in college it has been so much easier for me to understand than any other schooling I've had.

In secondary school, according to Vincent, he felt comfortable in his school program, which focused on his strengths and minimized those courses that would cause him stress. Vincent could not remember a formal transition plan meeting but had several conversations with his technical teacher, co-operative education teacher, and parents to discuss a career path. It was an informal plan that could change when opportunities presented themselves. Vincent took several different technical classes in secondary school to learn about different trades before making his decision. Everyone involved had one similar goal for Vincent—that he found meaningful employment after secondary school. When asked if he would disclose his LD to an employer, he said, “No, I don't think it is an issue for me.” Because he was involved in jobs where he could work with his hands, Vincent felt that his LD did not cause problems in the work setting.

### **Grace and School**

Grace recognized that Vincent had been fortunate to have had such a supportive school environment. When Vincent began Kindergarten, the family lived in a city; they moved into the country when Vincent entered Grade 2. In that year, Vincent's teacher recognized the possibility

that Vincent might have a learning disability and recommended an assessment. Grace explained this change of environment as instrumental to Vincent's success. She said:

I think that if we had not been in the rural school that Vincent would have fallen through the cracks. The city has bigger classes. If he had skated through elementary school into the higher grades without being diagnosed, I know that he would not have done well. He would have been too frustrated with himself to continue and he might not have found out what his strengths are.

Grace described the role of the school in transition planning for her son:

The school really took him in hand and we just followed along with their recommendations. I don't remember having a meeting with his teachers to discuss his transition. I remember the forms [IEP] coming home each year and I would sign them but there weren't any problems that I needed to discuss with teachers, so it wasn't formal.

Grace went on to say, "We could see what he enjoyed and what he was good at and he was leaning toward the trades. We knew that he wasn't cut out for an office job; that was not his personality." Vincent was fortunate to have had specific support in his school environment in the form of teachers and parents who encouraged him to enroll in classes that would allow him to gain some experience working with his hands so that he would focus his career goals on a trade. This process started when Vincent was in Grade 9 and his parents saw that he really excelled in his technical classes. They ensured that Vincent took courses where he would be successful and those which he required for graduation in the general program. Grace and Garrett were involved each year in helping Vincent choose interesting courses that would expose him to new skills. For example, Grace encouraged Vincent to take a welding course to see if he might enjoy welding as a career. She was interested in keeping open as many options as possible. On this topic, Grace remarked:

He excelled so much in his trade courses that we wanted him to be exposed to all of the options so that he could make an informed decision about his career opportunities.

Welders get paid very well and it would allow Vincent to work for a variety of companies.

When Vincent graduated, he won every technical education award—an acknowledgement of his talents. He was also rewarded with a scholarship to the college where he would do his apprenticeship. His teachers were happy to write glowing letters of reference for him. They

commented on both his excellent ability to work with his hands and his skills as a communicator and leader.

During Vincent's co-operative education placement at a local trucking company, he was offered an apprenticeship that would start immediately after his graduation. Grace said, "Before he was done the co-op, we knew that he would have a great job." In terms of college, she said, "We always assumed that he would go to college, but he had been working weekends with this company and getting paid for that work, so when we learned about the apprenticeship program we knew that it just made sense for him." Grace went on to say that the school was not really that involved in talking to them about his options. She recalled: "We didn't ever have a formal meeting with his school counsellors, but his shop teacher and mentor would always make a point of saying to us that he was doing so well in shop class." Finding enjoyment in a job in which he excelled made his transition choices easy for the family. Grace stated, "Becoming a diesel mechanic—it was a path that he would have the potential to grow." Both Grace and Garrett talked to him about the different options available and together they made the choice based on which path would provide him with the most opportunities. Grace described the thought process, "If he could become a diesel mechanic, then he could continue to get his other certificates later, such as welding." The focus was on keeping his options open and directing him toward a job that would suit his ability to gain employment based on the economy and where he had the best chance of growing into a leadership role within the company.

In terms of preparing Vincent for the apprenticeship, Grace and Garrett kept themselves well informed. Garrett explained:

For the apprenticeship you have to work so many hours and then get your schooling for eight weeks. Then you go back and earn more hours on the job and then go back to school to earn your second level. There are three levels. Vincent will write an exam in the fall for his third year apprenticeship and when he is done that he will be a licensed diesel mechanic working on transport trucks.

Grace noted her level of involvement was somewhat diminished now that Vincent was doing an apprenticeship. She stated, "I haven't had to do as much because he is gaining so much experience. He has the hands-on experience to go with the theory now. He is doing really well, getting 95% and 98% in his apprenticeship program."

## **Garrett and School**

Although Grace served as the main contact with the school, Garrett also advocated for his son. Vincent's Grade 4 teacher repeatedly kept him in class during recess because he was not able to complete his work during class time. Grace explained that during one hot day in June, "she kept him in for both recesses and during lunch so that he could work on whatever language pages the other kids had finished. Vincent came home so upset. It made us both sick to our stomachs." The next day, Garrett was still concerned about Vincent missing recess and lunch that went to the school and warned the teacher that "that better not happen again." Grace admitted that Garrett may have lost his temper with school staff. However, regardless of his communication strategy, his presence at the school reinforced for the school staff that Vincent was a child whose parents were involved, interested, and present in his school experiences and that they would complain if they felt that Vincent was being treated unfairly. In this instance, these parents were met with support rather than resistance from the school.

### **Summary of Themes using Systems Theory**

In terms of Vincent's transition plans, his interactions within each ecological system—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem—have produced specific themes. These themes are detailed below.

#### **Microsystem**

In terms of parental support, Grace and Garrett were proud that Vincent was getting into a trade that paid well. Having no post-secondary education themselves, they did not put pressure on Vincent to go to university or college. They encouraged Vincent to enter a post-secondary apprenticeship that would lead to a job. Vincent also explained that his parents

tried the best they could, they are hands-on parents. My Dad tried to help with my school work but after awhile he couldn't help me anymore. I was doing work in Grade 12 that was really at a university level. So they tried but couldn't help me with everything. At times, Vincent had to rely on his own abilities to navigate through his school program; he began to make choices based on what he could do on his own, relying less on help from his mother.

When asked about his role in contributing to his IEP and transition goals, he described having a meeting once a year with his teachers when they would ask him what accommodations he had in the past and what worked and what did not work. He said, "I don't remember a

discussion about a transition plan. They would ask me about my IEP but it didn't change over the years." Vincent described the IEP as never changing over the 10 years that he went to school and he really questioned its effectiveness. He furthered:

I am sure the items I had in Grade 2 were the same items I had in Grade 12. I never understood, if I have had this plan since Grade 2 and if I am getting help, then why do I still have the same needs in Grade 12 that I had in Grade 2?

When looking back at his school experiences and how he made the decision to transition to employment Vincent commented, "I was interested in it, but before my teacher asked me if I wanted to do a co-op I never thought of that direction." He said that he expected to go to college or university but noted, "I'm glad that my co-op teacher asked me if I wanted to do a placement because I don't think I could have gone to college or university either. I am in the right place now." Vincent felt that the co-operative education program helped him to consider future careers. It also led him to a part-time job and to full-time employment. Finding a role model and advocate in his technical teacher really set him on a path toward finding competitive employment. These experiences in secondary school gave him the ability to immerse himself in technical education classes and led to him having a successful school experience that transitioned him to successful post-school employment.

Vincent was not familiar with the term *self-advocate*; when asked if he advocated for himself, he explained:

In high school I quit taking the help that I didn't want. Sometimes the accommodations that they give are more of a bother than a help. The further I got along in school I got into classes that I was comfortable with, so I took less of those options.

Having the choice to use these resources was an important issue for Vincent; he appreciated the autonomy to make the choice himself, making the point that sometimes the stigma of being isolated was more of a hindrance than the benefits of receiving extra help.

### **Mesosystem**

After Vincent's diagnosis, school work became easier because he did not have to worry as much about being held to the same timelines as the other students. Accommodations were made for him and his teachers were understanding and communicative with his parents. After Grade 2 and with the help of the accommodations, Vincent was able to maintain average grades. In secondary school, he received extra help with examinations in the form of a reader and extra

time. About the accommodations, Vincent said, “It was nice to know they were there when I needed them. The extra time was nice because I didn’t feel rushed, but I didn’t always need them.” As a coping mechanism, he learned to take courses that suited his strengths, such as mechanics and carpentry. These choices increased his enjoyment in school academically and socially; he could spend most of his day in the technical class with peers who shared his interests. His parents advocated for him but found that, as he progressed through school, their job became easier because Vincent began to take the advice of teachers who encouraged him toward a career path. Grace stated that his diagnosis was helpful in that she knew that the help was there when it was needed. She went on to say, “It took a lot of pressure off of him and off of us as well. I checked the IEP each year but I didn’t have to be that involved in writing it.” Certainly Grace and Garrett made sure that Vincent took advantage of each opportunity available to him. They were effective in communicating with the school when needed, in taking advice, and in letting Vincent make the final decisions about his career path. As a triad, the team of Vincent, his parents, and his school worked together to navigate Vincent’s educational path successfully.

In terms of sibling relationships, it appeared to me that Vincent’s learning disability had no real effect on his relationships with Gwyneth and Alistair. According to both of them, they were not often exposed to his academic weaknesses because he was older and they did not see him struggle. Interestingly, Vincent and Gwyneth, the oldest siblings, seemed to be the most alike in their interests and goals. They described the youngest, Alistair, as the “black sheep”—the one who does not follow the unwritten family rules. He was the one who rebelled; he spent most of his time with friends rather than with family. It seemed to me that he was more guarded with his family and did not discuss things that were on his mind the way Vincent and Gwyneth did. Alistair was less active in family life than the others. When the siblings took part in the Life Style Inventory, Alistair received lower ratings from both his siblings on items such as “responsibility”, “intelligence” and “grades”. He also received the highest ratings on the more egocentric ratings of cares most about “physical appearance”, “rebellious”, “temper”, “materialistic”, and “standards of right and wrong”. Alistair took a carpentry course at the local college and said he was in the course because his family was “pushing me to work and pushing me to take that program.” It appeared to me that the transition planning of the youngest child seemed to have been determined by the successful experience of the eldest. However, Alistair did not demonstrate the skill in trade work that Vincent did. This path did not seem to be a good

fit in terms of his interests. It may have been that Alistair had less support in his transition because he did not garner the support of a teacher who would act as his role model and advocate. As well, he was resistant to participating in a co-operative education program that would lead to a work placement because many of his friends were on the path of college or university. Alistair's family did not particularly encourage him in this direction because they were not familiar with the process and felt anxious about the cost of university. Instead, they encouraged the trades for Alistair because that path would lead to a job. Grace said, "He doesn't really say, 'This is what I want to be or do.' He is just flying with what comes along in the moment, but not for lack of suggestion on our part."

### **Exosystem**

In describing the family system as a whole, Vincent said, "We are all close, we all get along. There are good days and bad days but everyone does what they can for each other." It seemed to me that the roles within this family were consistent. The matriarch seemed to guide the decision-making process with the patriarch's input; in turn, the patriarch supported the decisions of the matriarch. This pattern might have been a natural result of Garrett being away from home during the week. Vincent explained that his mother was always more involved in helping him with school work, but that his father was very hands-on and supported his children in other ways, such as coaching baseball and becoming a Cub Leader to spend quality time with all his children. Vincent thought that his father also may have had trouble learning and could not give the academic support that his mother could. When asked if his learning disability had an effect on the relationships with other members of his family, Vincent replied, "I don't think so." As the oldest sibling, his academic problems in school went relatively unnoticed by his younger brother and sister. At the point where they might have recognized his deficiencies, he had begun to learn coping mechanisms, such as memorization. His father made sure that Vincent took part in social outlets such as joining clubs and participating on sports teams so that he always had a few close friends. As well, he became very good at using his strengths, such as working with his hands. These strengths led to success in secondary school. He also became the first member in his family to go to college to work toward a trade. Instead of seeing Vincent's learning disability as a stigma, this family looked at Vincent's progress and accomplishments, despite the disability, as the mark to attain. Garrett and Grace encouraged their younger children, Gwyneth and Alistair, to participate in co-operative education programs and to go to college. As a result,

Gwyneth also took part in the program, working in the school system as an educational assistant; that program helped to transition her into a college course, Early Childhood Education. Grace described the process of transitioning Alistair as more problematic. Alistair was an adolescent who was motivated by his social life. Although Grace and Garrett tried to coax him into taking co-operative education, ultimately his decision was not to do it. Grace explained the situation: “None of his friends were taking a co-op and so he didn’t want to miss half a day of school with his friends to take a co-op.” After a year of working on the farm part-time and being unsure of what he wanted to do for a job, Alistair chose to follow in his older brother’s footsteps and began working toward an apprenticeship in carpentry. When asked about advocacy and her involvement with her other children, Grace stated:

I will always ask about how they are doing, do they need help. I have learned more about four-wheel drive and two- and four-stroke engines in order to help Vincent with his tests. I am available to help him in whatever he needs. . . . It is the same with my other kids— Vincent might need more help, but I will give the same help to my other children.

### **Macrosystem**

It appeared to me that the most important cultural and social factors that influenced Vincent’s transition plan involved the rural lifestyle in which he was immersed as a young child. Vincent talked about his interest in cars and four-wheeling and that he became interested in fixing the toys that he would play with on weekends: “I found it interesting to take something that doesn’t run and take it to pieces and put it together to make it work.” Living in the country and using all-terrain vehicles as well as having a father who drove a transport may have provided the basis to support Vincent’s interest in becoming a mechanic. Vincent confided the final steps of his schooling and his goals for the future when he said, “I plan to become a shop foreman and then, possibly in the future, I would love to become a shop teacher.”

### **Summary**

As a young boy Vincent was shy and socially withdrawn as he tried to hide his academic deficits. As an adolescent, Vincent found a clear career path in secondary school, because of the help of a teacher who took special interest in steering him into a job where he would excel. This teacher recognized his talents and introduced him to a career opportunity, and, at the same time, assisted him in skill development.

At the microsystem level, Vincent was supported in his transition goals by his parents,

who appreciated the teacher's guidance and encouraged and aided him in learning about career options. His parents had no specific expectations or goals organized for him and were glad that he had found something that he liked to do. At the meso-, exo- and macrosystem levels, his rural upbringing enhanced his interests in hands-on activities, from which he developed strengths. His kind and humble personality made him easy to guide and his technical and co-operative education teachers were happy to support him. In return, Vincent demonstrated a strong work ethic and professionalism both in school and in the workplace. He took the advice of his teachers and, with the support of his parents, he was led into an apprenticeship program after secondary school. In terms of his family system, as the oldest child, it seemed to me that Vincent became a role model for the younger siblings. Grace and Garrett were happy that Vincent was being guided by his teachers into a job that would give him gainful employment. Because of this successful experience, they followed similar steps in transitioning their two younger children.

## Chapter 9 - Cross-Case Analysis

In this chapter, a cross-case analysis of each of the narratives was prepared according to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model. Themes that emerged within each of Bronfenbrenner's nested systems were compartmentalized according to Family Systems Theory (1997).

### Microsystem

At the microsystem level, findings were organized into themes related to *family characteristics*; (1) characteristics of the family as a whole, (2) characteristics of individual members, and (3) unique circumstances as well as *family functions*; including issues influencing: affection, self-esteem, advocacy, social relationships, recreation, and education.

### Family Characteristics

**Family.** Turnbull and Turnbull described the importance of understanding family characteristics as important in a researcher's ability to build trusting partnerships among families being studied. Family size, form (including sibling gender, marital status), cultural background, socioeconomic status, and geographic location are characteristics that influence roles, responsibilities, and decisions made within families (Turnbull & Turnbull). In this research, family size was relatively small, ranging from 2-5 members. Moreover, the influence and presence of extended family members did not seem to be a large factor in decisions made regarding the transition. Four of the five families studied resembled traditional nuclear families. In one of the five cases, divorce resulted in separating the traditional family into two units. In the Sparrow family, because Donna did not consider Darth's father as an active member of their family system, she did not want his comments to be included in the study. This family was unique in another way – Darth was an only child and this case study did not include a sibling perspective. Common to each of the five cases was the role of the mother as a primary advocate for the children's education. Where fathers were involved they seemed to hold a secondary role, such as financial provider and emotional supporter.

**Individual Members.** In each case, the degree and severity of exceptionality differed; this difference had an impact on the needs of the adolescent, the interactions among family members, and services received within the schools. Each of these adolescents had a diagnosis that points to deficits in different areas of learning, from dyslexia to non-verbal LD, to dual diagnosis of giftedness and LD, the presence of a speech and language disorder, as well as the

possibility of autism. The experiences of these adolescents as they go through the transition from secondary school to post-secondary education and or employment are unique, yet similarities in their stories exist: the process, navigating the system, and the influences of and on family members involved. Below these experiences are compared and contrasted as they navigate the transition process.

**Unique Circumstances.** Each adolescent had special challenges making his or her transition unique. Both personal characteristics and the family environment contributed to different facilitators and barriers to the transition process.

Alice's severe deficits in communication, her inability to self-advocate, and the possibility of an undiagnosed developmental disorder created a set of unique challenges in her relationships with family members, school staff, and peers. She had few friends and little employment experience. In contrast, Vincent had a supportive home and school environment that worked together to direct his career pursuits toward an apprenticeship. At age 18, his career path had been set. However, he indicated that he aspired to teach one day, to follow the footprint of his technology and trades teacher. With time and experience in the field he may achieve this dream. However at the present, teaching would not be possible because both his transition plan and high school program have narrowed his employment and post-secondary education options.

Mary and Laura were both high-achieving students in elementary school and therefore experienced a late diagnosis. When their grades dropped in middle school, they developed poor self-confidence and anxiety disorders. The girls were diagnosed with LD in secondary school. Both girls and their families struggled to understand the source of the problems. This difficulty in understanding caused frustration among the adolescents, parents, and siblings and strained family relationships. Words such as "dumb" and "not normal" were used by family members to describe the girls and their perceived failures in school. Laura and Darth had a diagnosis of non-verbal LD. Laura struggled to connect socially to peers, often confiding too much information to them. Darth had difficulty with fine motor skills and navigating the physical space around him, paired with inappropriate social behaviours, may have caused communication problems for him with his teachers and peers. Darth's parents divorced during his first year of secondary school, making this adjustment difficult.

## **Family Functions**

In Family Systems Theory, the theme *family functions* include an examination of how the members of the family contribute to the education, affection, self-esteem, daily care, socialization, and recreation of its members.

**Education.** In terms of education, parents oriented their children into paths with which they themselves were familiar. Parents who attended university had the expectation that their children would attend university to open all options for a professional career. Parents who had not attended post-secondary schooling expected their children to attend a shorter post-secondary program that would lead directly to gainful employment. When looking at transition planning and choice of school, parents wanted their adolescent to attend a place that would allow their child to build on their social, emotional, creative, and academic strengths. All parents were practical and protective in their thinking that a school close to home would be beneficial to the adolescent. In cases where an older sibling had transitioned to a university or college, the parents were encouraging the adolescent with LD to transition to the same school. Parents seemed to focus on transitioning their child into a program, school, career, that they themselves were familiar, such as ODSP, an apprenticeship, a college program or a university education.

**Acceptance.** Acceptance is characterised by showing verbal and physical affection and unconditional love (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2011). It is also demonstrated through acceptance of the disability and appreciation of the differences in the individual (2011). In four of the five families, parents had accepted their child's disability and took the steps of having him or her formally identified. These parents wanted to get to the root of their child's learning, emotional, and social problems. They felt that having an assessment and a label would help them obtain the accommodations their children needed to be successful in school. In the fifth case, parents struggled with the stigma related to the term disability because they connected a strong academic performance to higher intelligence.

**Discovering "Islands of Competence".** Before the diagnosis of LD all participants experienced a sense of academic failure, feeling different, and being unable to fit in with peers. In all cases the reaction was to withdraw in an attempt to disguise their learning problems. Before the diagnosis, the adolescents remarked on their awareness that they had fallen academically behind their peers. Whether this awareness came in Kindergarten or later, it produced a sense of shame. Each of the participants coped with this awareness by withdrawing

socially from peers. At one point all parents recalled that their child was not happy in school. For the two girls who had a later diagnosis coping with these feelings led to an anxiety disorder and depression. After the diagnosis, the psychological assessment provided each family with a new awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of the adolescent. Once told about their particular strengths, this information allowed parents, teachers, and the adolescent to plan an academic program which would allow them to work within these strengths. Four of five participants found academic and some social success by better understanding their own limitations. However, when successful experiences were not experienced by the participant, as in one case, they continued to experience academic failure, social withdrawal, depression and anxiety.

**Advocacy.** In terms of advocacy, each of the five families had different experiences. In four or the five cases, parental advocacy led to self-advocacy on the part of the adolescent. In contrast, one parent took on a role beyond advocacy within the school, and became the link acting like a bridge between her daughter and the school. This adolescent developed learned helplessness behaviours and did not take initiative in her school environment, homework, social life, or home environment. The parent encountered resistance and negative attitudes from school staff and she herself developed a negative attitude in dealing with the school. The ineffective communication between home and school, led to unsuccessful transition planning.

**Social Relations.** All of the adolescents described their social life as a struggle during the years when they were unsuccessful in school. Three of the adolescents found happiness in their peer group when they found friends who shared common interests in school, such as studying, music and film, and shop classes. These friendships were important because they gave the adolescent a safe place within the school environment. The adolescents surrounded themselves with like-minded peers and these friends were useful in motivating the adolescent to go to school, to compete for marks, and to create transition goals that reflected the values of their social circle. Two adolescents struggled to find a peer group that would accept them. One of these girls lacked self-monitoring skills and would share too much information about her personal struggles with peers who were not yet friends. The second adolescent, had difficulty communicating with peers verbally due to speech and language problems. She avoided all peer interactions and was often truant, the school environment caused her great anxiety.

**Recreation.** The recreation activities for each adolescent were purposeful activities reinforced by parental support. Parents encouraged activities that would lead to the development

of responsibility and employment skills, positive social friendships, and preparation for career planning, as well as school related sports and study groups. To facilitate their transition adolescent roles included first, school based activities that would allow them to keep up academically, then part-time employment and/or interest-development activities. All of the adolescents except Alice were engaged in activities that would support the next stage in their life in post-secondary school or work.

### **Summary**

In terms of *family functions*, Turnbull and Turnbull (1997) explain that “assets and challenges in one *family function* usually affect other functions” (p. 49). At the microsystem level, each family member in the family system had distinct roles and responsibilities pertaining to *family functions*. The largest influence on transition plans came from parental expectations. Parents without a post-secondary education appeared to value an education that would train their adolescent for a specific job. Likewise, parents who attended university expected that their adolescents would also attend. Hence, the background of the parents affected the expectations and decisions made around transition goals for their children. In this study, mothers took on the primary caregiving role in terms of education and advocacy. Fathers were financial supporters and involved in large decisions regarding the transition planning. In cases where the adolescent was diagnosed with LD in elementary school, families had a longer adjustment period and acceptance of the diagnosis was not an issue for these families at the point of transitioning. In cases where the adolescents were not diagnosed until secondary school, years of struggling without understanding brought self-confidence issues, mental health concerns, and tension among family members. For these families, adjusting to the LD label and trying to plan for the future during this adjustment was an emotional and mental challenge.

### **Mesosystem**

At the mesosystem level, findings were organized into categories of *family interactions*: parental, marital, sibling, and extended family relationships.

### **Family Interactions**

**Parental Interactions.** In all cases, the adolescents reported a close relationship with their primary advocate, their mother. Four of the five adolescents reported close relationships with their fathers as well. However, tensions existed between parents and adolescents when the adolescents were not achieving an academic standard consistent with parental expectations. In

one family, these tensions were laced with verbal abuse. In the case where there was a dysfunctional relationship with the father, the lack of respect for the work he did was a motivating factor in the adolescent's transition plan.

**Sibling Interactions.** In terms of sibling interactions, tensions were high in three of the five cases. In these cases siblings were resentful of the added attention given to the sibling diagnosed with LD, and felt that the parental attention was not shared equally. At times siblings perceived that the sibling with LD was taking advantage of their parent(s) in terms of the amount of time and support given and stated that the sibling with LD was capable of being more independent. Siblings became particularly upset when a parent supported the sibling with LD by taking her side over other family members in disputes within in the home. In these cases where a parent often took sides in standing up for the sibling with LD, the other siblings looked at that sibling as mentally and emotionally weak. In this study, all three of the participants who experienced problems with siblings were female. These siblings resented the learned helplessness of their sisters. Therefore, in three of four cases, siblings were especially sensitive to the extra attention that their mothers gave to the adolescent with LD. Furthermore, parents often expected the adolescent with LD to transition in the same way an older adolescent transitioned. Moreover, even if tensions existed between siblings, the adolescent with LD also expected to transition to a college or university just as their older sibling had and in many cases they had plans to attend the same post-secondary institution. In one case, when asked if the sibling's presence at the school offered support to the adolescent with LD, the adolescent flatly disagreed. She denied that her reason for transitioning to a particular institution was as a result of the sibling's presence there.

The males in this study had different experiences. In one case sibling relationships were not strained because as his siblings explained, as the older sibling his academic problems were not visible to them. His siblings respected him and his easy-going temperament. As an only child, the other male was not impacted by relationships with siblings, but he did have the extra burden of navigating his role between his divorced parents.

When considering the *Life Style Inventory*, siblings responses were influenced by a number of factors including: perceived weakness in terms of dependency on parents, having a LD, birth order, gender, and shared values. In this study, those siblings who were rated first on negative attributes: *stubbornness*, *attention seeking*, and *low intelligence*, were the ones with LD,

the youngest, female, most dependent and/or did not conform to family values. As well, they were rated lowest on all positive attributes: *high intelligence, responsibility, and strong work ethic*. In one case, the adolescent with LD was the oldest, had shared family values, and was male, and his siblings rated him highest on positive attributes. In the case where the sibling refused to participate in the interview process, the adolescent with LD still rated the non-participating sibling as highest on all positive attributes. Furthermore, another sibling who was rated lowest on all positive attributes by her sisters, also rated herself lowest on all positive attributes.

**Marital Interactions.** The Cardinal and Robin families seemed to hold more traditional family values than the other families studied. In these families, fathers were the patriarchs and at times there was a power imbalance between the spouses. When there was conflict between a mother and father, the children sided with one parent over the other. These mothers had the added pressure of having to keep a happy balance between the needs of their husbands and the needs of their children. On the other hand, the spouses in the Heron and Magpie families demonstrated a stable power relationship when it came to issues related to children and the school. The matriarch made decisions and the father supported those decisions. In terms of these families, cohesiveness seemed to be stronger because each member in the family knew the roles and responsibilities of the other members. In terms of decisions regarding their children, mothers tended to be the most informed about specific educational, health, and emotional needs. They were available to assist their child, with support ranging from advocating with the school to spending one-on-one time working on homework. Being informed paired with being the primary authority to make decisions regarding the child created unity within the family. The family system seemed most harmonious when fathers supported mothers in decisions regarding the children and when they provided emotional support and practical support to their spouses. Donna, who received neither emotional nor financial support from her ex-husband, talked about issues of burnout in her advocacy efforts.

**Extended Family Relationships.** Members of the extended families were not an important focus for data collected in this study. However, in three of the case studies, individuals discussed the important role that a grandparent, aunt/uncle or cousin had in supporting the adolescents academically and socially. Members of the extended families also served as role models and helped the parents and adolescents make informed decisions about transitions.

**Adolescent, Parent, School Relationships.** In terms of planning for the transition to employment or post-secondary education, the relationships between the adolescent, parent and the school varied in levels of support. Just one adolescent studied was fortunate to have found a teacher who was very influential in shaping and supporting his transition plans. This teacher was invaluable to the parents and helped them to envision a career path for their son. Vincent's transition plan was created with teacher input and a focus on his strengths.

For four of five families, the transition plan was an informal one developed between parent and adolescent with little influence from school staff. In three of these cases, the school was aware of the adolescent's career goals because of the advocacy done by the parent and adolescent. Once the adolescent and parents agreed to a transition plan, the adolescent worked within the school to make sure that the school program (e.g., academic program, co-op) reflected those transition goals. When teachers were supportive, the process was smooth. When teachers were skeptical, the adolescents were forced to advocate harder for support. If the adolescents did not have the self-advocacy skills, the result was an inadequate school program that did not suit the adolescent's or family's plans for transition.

Transitions plans for these students focused on entering a job or career that would allow them to use their strengths. As well, parents were thinking of an appropriate post-secondary placement that would include friendships and having family close by to offer support. Families who were transitioning their adolescent to university had alternative plans in place for the possible career options for their adolescent. They wanted their adolescents to gain a post-secondary experience that would open the doors to various possibilities. Families who were transitioning their adolescent into college or into an apprenticeship program were focused on the end goal of helping their adolescent find a job.

One family was unsuccessful in advocating for the appropriate school program that would meet their transition plans. Three factors influenced this development. First, the parents were unaware of the prerequisite high school program to enable entry into a college program. Second, the adolescent, was not able to self-advocate. Third, the school was not effective in communicating with the family about the student's options for transitioning into post-secondary education or employment. Therefore, this family was very disappointed to find out too late that their daughter would not be eligible to enter a college program.

## **Summary**

In terms of *family interactions*, interactions between family members impact the communication and interactions among family members (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). This section looked at a triad of interactions between parents, siblings, school and adolescent with LD within the microsystem.

Marital relationships were strengthened when the fathers supported mother's decisions regarding their children. Mothers typically were more attuned to the adolescents' needs. In cases of a later diagnosis, marital and parental relationships were strained because both mother and father could not understand why their adolescent was not achieving in school. The mothers in this study tended to coddle their children, while fathers questioned the adolescent's motivation, characterizing the adolescents behaviour as "lazy" or "dumb". The diagnosis improved these relationships giving a cause to the perceived unmotivated behaviour.

Siblings were very sensitive to stress in the family system caused by the adolescent with LD. This stress was most apparent when she developed physical and mental health problems that caused parents to exert a significant amount of time and energy on her. Siblings then became jealous of the amount of time parents spent supporting the adolescent, which created conflict between parents, child, and sibling relationships. Sibling interactions were also influenced by birth order and gender. When the adolescent with LD was older, siblings were not attuned to his or her academic problems and did not use those problems to attribute negative characteristics to the adolescent. The youngest sibling in the families seemed to rank lower on positive characteristics regardless of presence of disability. Female siblings were particularly unkind to the adolescent with LD if she was also female; perceiving her to rate high on negative attributes in the Life Style Inventory. Moreover, females were kinder to their adolescent siblings with LD when they were male. Males were also kinder to their adolescent siblings when they were female, rating them equally high on the Life Style Inventory.

In terms of extended family relationships, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins acted as role models providing a social network, academic support, and career advice for some of the adolescents.

Communication between the adolescent, parents, and school was an important tool to achieve the ideal transition plan. Parents and adolescents needed to have their own transition plan established without the guidance of school staff, and they needed to be active advocates so that the adolescent's high school program was one that would support these transition goals.

With the exception of Vincent, schools played a minor or non-existent role in transition planning. For the most part, the program requirements and accommodations to reach specific post-school goals were not even considered by guidance counsellors. In one case, when the student with LD experienced academic difficulties, the school's recommendation was to change her program, which would have jeopardized her post-secondary plans. If parents and adolescents were not aware of the long-term effects of dropping a program level in secondary school, and if a teacher did not offer guidance, then the adolescent completed high school with limited options. Hence, it was the responsibility of the parents and adolescents to develop an informed transition plan.

### **Exosystem**

At the exosystem level, findings will be organized according to *family interactions as changes in the family life cycle* take place. For the families in this study, the focus was on interactions that occurred with the school and home during the transition process as these families worked to transition the adolescent with LD into an appropriate career. Each family experienced facilitators and barriers to the transition that may be attributed to external causes, such as teacher strengths or inadequacies, educational policies, and government procedures.

In all five cases, the IPRC meetings were described as “a routine signing of a piece of paper.” Parents were not sure that their children were receiving any of the help to which they were entitled. None of the parents and adolescents could identify a formal transition plan or recall a formal transition plan meeting. When asked, the members of the Heron and Magpie families indicated they had never heard the term *transition plan* and initially did not understand what a transition plan was. Once they understood the term, they could describe their own plans for transitioning their adolescent into employment. The Cardinal, Robin, and Sparrow families understood what the transition plan was but did not recollect a meeting or discussion with school staff concerning it. These three families had what they called a personal transition plan developed by the parent and adolescent, but remarked that it did not involve input from the school.

A short-coming in the educational program of Darth, Laura, Mary, and Alice was the lack of opportunity to do a cooperative education placement. Vincent's was the only school program to include a co-operative education placement. While each of the other participants expressed a keen interest in taking a career planning and a co-op course, they were not offered this program because of limited space and they were reserved for students in the non-academic stream. Alice

would have benefited from the skills developed through career planning, co-operative education, or vocational training courses. However, she missed so much school that she was not considered by the school to be a suitable candidate for them.

### **Summary**

Family interactions change as the child matures and is able to interact with people in different ways. The interactions between the adolescent, home, and school are interdependent (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). Interactions at the exosystem level include those interactions that do not directly involve the adolescent; however, they do have an indirect impact on the adolescent (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this study, the policies governing practices within the school impacted the adolescents' ability to transition successfully from high school. Each of the families remarked that after the IPRC meeting there was no formal meeting to discuss a transition plan. As well, some families were not familiar with the terminology regarding the transition plan. In all but one case, transition plans and discussions regarding the adolescent's future were initiated from the parents and stemmed from their expectations. Each of the adolescents and their family members reflected that a co-operative education placement would have been beneficial to include in the transition plan.

### **Macrosystem**

At the macrosystem level, findings will be organized further according to *family interactions as changes in the family life cycle* take place looking at societal interactions that influenced the transition experiences of the adolescent.

These adolescents found role models in teachers and family members who sparked their interest in certain fields, such as Vincent's technology and trades teacher, Darth's film teacher, Mary's successful aunts and uncles, Laura's father, and Alice's sisters. With the exception of Alice, these individuals helped the adolescent envision a future career lifestyle and find a passion. Each adolescent was able to match those aspirations with the appropriate transition plans.

Social networks also seemed to influence transition choices. Vincent grew up in a rural area and went to a rural high school. His social activities included spending time working with engines and vehicles. An apprenticeship career path was a good fit for him in terms of the values within his community. Vincent's mother credited his rural upbringing as an important factor contributing to his success as a student. She believed the characteristics of a rural school (smaller

classes, fewer behaviour problems) meant that his teachers had more time to work with him. Vincent's siblings also transitioned into career paths that reflected parental and community values: a two-year college programs that provide work placements as part of the program.

In the cases of Mary, Darth, and Laura, the decision to attend university was an expectation set by their parents and reinforced throughout the students' adolescent years. The community and social status of the family seem to have an influence on parental expectations. All decisions regarding school program were filtered through these parents to ensure that no doors to a university education would be closed. Darth, Laura, and Mary had a general career aspirations planned, as well as alternatives if required. The only transition plan decision that was considered mandatory by the adolescent and their parents was a university education. The specific type of program was an option that each of these adolescents could choose based on their individual strengths and interests.

In Alice's case, the plan to obtain ODSP funding did not materialize and there did not seem to be a plan B in place. Moreover, her opportunities for future education were limited by the high school courses she had taken. Additionally, her learned helplessness seemed to jeopardize her employment opportunities.

### **Summary**

These adolescents were guided in their decisions about their future based on the expectations of their parents. They chose role models—people with whom they connected and whom they admired—based on a lifestyle that looked appealing to them. Perhaps the community itself played a role in the level of attention in school that some adolescents received over others. One family credited the rural school setting as being able to provide more support than an urban one. The connections that the home had with the school proved to be important for these families.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, in terms of transition planning, these adolescents and their parents created a plan for the future that was influenced by interactions in their microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Family characteristics, family functions, and family interactions intermingled to influence the adolescents' expectations and experiences as they planned their transition from secondary school and into post-secondary education or employment. In this study, parental desires proved to be the most important factor in making

decisions and parents were very involved in the decision-making process by voicing clear expectations and by providing the support and resources needed to meet those expectations. In most cases, the diagnosis of LD did not limit parental expectations for the adolescent's transition plans. Moreover, the diagnosis allowed parents and adolescent to become more informed as to the adolescent's strengths and weaknesses. In one case the parents and adolescents did not communicate their expectations for transition planning with the school, and the school did not provide an appropriate transition program. A partnership between home and school that involved advocacy were important contributors to the management of transition goals. Mothers were the primary advocates in each case, and they exerted extensive time, energy, and resources into the emotional, academic, and social welfare of their adolescent with LD. At times it caused tension among mothers and their other children, as well as emotional strain between siblings. When the adolescents with LD experienced mental health and physical problems, the family found it harder to focus on the academic goals. In these instances, transition plans were set aside to deal with the health concerns. It was only during these times that members of the family questioned the adolescent's ability to reach the family expectations for post-secondary education or employment. Adolescents became motivated by finding role models including teachers, parents, siblings, and extended family who could help guide their education and employment goals. A table of findings can be found in Appendix I.

## Chapter 10 – Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand what influences the decisions adolescents who have learning disabilities make regarding their post-school employment and educational outcomes. Drawing mainly on the theoretical perspectives of Bronfenbrenner's Ecology of Human Development (1979) and Turnbull and Turnbull's Family Systems Theory (1997), the researcher proceeded to examine the factors that influenced the decision-making process. The primary research question was, what are the expectations and experiences of students who have learning disabilities and their families with regard to the transition process? The secondary questions were linked to Bronfenbrenner's systems and the impediments and facilitators within each of them.

In order to uncover these answers the researcher interviewed five adolescents with LD and their families. She asked questions related to experiences and expectations that adolescents who have LD and their families had during the transition process. Information gained from the different perspectives of each participant—adolescent with LD, mother, father, and sibling(s) where applicable—provided a rich description of the elements that impeded or facilitated the transitions of the adolescents. Data were organised into Bronfenbrenner's nested systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Further organising the data according to the interactions within each of these systems allowed the researcher to see how the environment surrounding the adolescent had an impact on the decisions made regarding their transition into further education or employment. Secondary research questions were asked to assure that the researcher was gaining pertinent information as to how each system influenced these decisions. These secondary research questions were:

1. What at the microsystem (adolescent-family/teachers) level facilitates or acts as a barrier to successful transitions for students who have learning disabilities into post-secondary education or employment?
2. What at the mesosystem (interactions between student, school, home) level facilitates or acts as a barrier to successful transitions for students with learning disabilities into post-secondary education or employment?
3. What at the exosystem (triadic interactions) level facilitates or acts as a barrier to successful transitions for students with learning disabilities into post-secondary education or employment?

4. What at the macrosystem (society) level facilitates or acts as a barrier to successful transitions for students with learning disabilities into post-secondary education or employment?

The findings will be discussed as they relate to each research question and the literature. The researcher will offer insights into the main themes, analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of the data in terms of how it can extend our understanding of the phenomenon investigated.

**Primary Research Question: What are the Experiences and Expectations of Adolescents with LD and their Families with regard to the Transition Process?**

This research question will be answered by highlighting specific experiences common to all adolescents with LD who participated in this research and then by discussing themes that emerged in terms of expectations of each member in the family system. Experiences and expectations cannot be separated as they appear in a reciprocal relationship, one having an influence on the other and vice versa, in a circular analogy.

**Diagnosis.** One of the most important uses of the diagnosis was the power it gave both parents and adolescents to advocate for accommodations in the Individual Education Plan (IEP). This finding was consistent with work on self-directed IEP meetings by Childre and Chambers, (2005). These authors note that involvement in the IEP process increased family satisfaction and encouraged more collaborative participation by all IEP team members. However, these authors found in many cases that families still played a passive role in developing the IEP. Likewise, the families in this study also seemed to play a passive role, only one parent was involved in directing the IEP process. The others were able to use the documentation to advocate for services when needed. In this way, all families had more influence in their advocacy than they would have had without the diagnosis. The diagnosis allowed parents and adolescents to understand their children's needs. However, when the students in this study were diagnosed in elementary school, families had a longer adjustment period. The acceptance of the diagnosis was not as difficult for these families at the point of transitioning. This acceptance is in contrast to the two families in this study whose adolescents were diagnosed in secondary school, a situation leading to misunderstandings and concern among family members as to the intellectual capacities of the adolescent and her ability to meet future expectations. These findings are consistent with the findings of Litner, Mann-Feder, and Guérard, (2005), who reported that students who were diagnosed later in their formal education were not supported emotionally during their struggles

in school and felt misunderstood by family members. Moreover in a study by Graungaard and Skov (2006) on parental perceptions about the need to diagnose children as “disabled”, the researchers found that parents needed time to process the notion of having a child with a disability, stating “this realization was related to the diagnostic process, and information and communication should be individualized accordingly” (p.1, 2006). In the current study, students experiencing academic difficulties in the upper grades before their diagnosis resulted in strained relationships with parents and siblings owing to lack of understanding of why these difficulties were occurring. Two families had members who felt that these difficulties arose because of intellectual deficits in their children and they struggled to accept the adolescents’ weaknesses. As well, each adolescent at some point before the diagnosis felt inadequate and confused by the cause of her academic deficits. As Brown (2008) discovered, individuals with LD learn about their disability by comparing their abilities and inabilities to those of other students. They construct a baseline for what is normal and then find themselves to be mediocre by comparison. The pairing of a negative self-perception and conflict with family members over their inadequate performance caused two girls to develop depression. However, after the diagnosis the knowledge of the reason for their academic difficulties was a motivator for them to continue to work hard to prove to themselves and to others that they could achieve their goals.

After the diagnosis, some parents described having to reconsider the expectations they had for their adolescent’s academic achievements. The parents who struggled with the idea of lowering expectations were the parents of the two girls who were diagnosed late. There are a few reasons for this situation. First, these adolescents were the ones who experienced both academic and mental health problems in secondary school and therefore had some extra challenges to overcome, which caused these parents to question the girls abilities to transition successfully into post-secondary education or employment. Second, if the adolescent did not demonstrate the ability to be successful academically, these expectations changed. As Duquette and Fullarton (2009) found when interviewing adults diagnosed late with LD, these adults attributed their undiagnosed LD to have negatively affected their academic achievement, social skills, and career outcomes. Moreover, most of these participants experience depression. The two girls in the current study who had a late diagnosis in secondary school, also struggled with mental health problems, including depression, anxiety and an eating disorder. Further research is needed to understand if there is a deeper connection between a late diagnosis and mental health concerns.

**Advocacy.** The late diagnosis ultimately did not alter the expectations that parents and adolescents in this study had for post-school employment or post-secondary education. With a diagnosis, parents in this study became involved in advocacy behaviours similar to those described by Duquette, Fullarton, Orders, and Robertson-Grewal (2011) including awareness, seeking information, presenting the case, and monitoring. After the diagnosis, most parents and adolescents began to seek information as to possible post-school employment opportunities, as well as appropriate post-secondary school options. In four families, parents and adolescents looked into career options based on the strengths and interests of the adolescent. After the diagnosis, most parents and adolescents were involved in monitoring the adolescents' secondary school program to ensure that it would meet the requirements of the adolescents' transition goals. In all cases but one, adolescents and parents worked together to advocate for accommodations and transition needs. At the secondary level, most of these adolescents learned to self-advocate.

In four families, the diagnosis pushed parents and adolescents to advocate and to plan for post-school outcomes. However, these adolescents also adopted a range of advocacy roles: a few took the lead in communicating with teachers and in researching post-secondary school options, while others relied on their parents to present post-secondary options. Unfortunately, only one adolescent had a teacher who provided career guidance and arranged post-school employment opportunities. When parents understood the connection between their child's secondary school program and options for post-secondary education, they monitored school progress accordingly. However, in one case the parents and adolescent were unaware of the connection between the school program and transition goals, and because they did not communicate their expectations to the school, the goals for the adolescents' transition were not achieved. Naugle, Campbell, and Gray (2010) contend that school counsellors have an important role in the transition of students, describing them as "highly skilled" to direct adolescent transitions. However, the findings of this qualitative study show that high school counsellors were often not informed of the transition plans of the adolescent. Moreover, some of these counsellors gave advice that would not enable the adolescent to achieve her transition plans. Naugle et al. (2010) assert that counsellors are underutilized in transition support and the current study found that to be the case. Furthermore, Whitley et al. (2007) discovered that teachers held lower aspirations for their student with LD. Many of the adolescents in this study had an experience with at least one teacher/counselor who had low expectations for their transition and only one school took the lead in initiating post high

school plans. This may be part of the reason that the four of five families did not include the school in the transition planning process.

In this study, the educational experiences of the parents provided a basis for guiding the education of the adolescent. Lambert, Zeman, Allen and Bussiere (2001) found both parental educational attainment and parental values towards post-secondary education were related to post-secondary participation, “the proportion of youth who participated in post-secondary education increased as parental education increased” (p.9). This study also found that parental education levels influenced adolescent educational expectations. In three cases, parents who had higher levels of education were more informed as to the limitations that would be placed on their adolescent if courses were dropped or levels were lowered in their high school program. However, the two families who had no personal experiences with higher levels of education were more willing to accept the recommendations made by the school. In Vincent’s case the approach had positive results and in Alice’s case the outcome was poor. Moreover, in this case the adolescent did not have self-advocacy skills which resulted in an inadequate school program that did not suit her plans for transition. Milson (2002) found that only 68% of secondary school counsellors played a role in transition planning for students with disabilities. The results of this study indicate that perhaps educators themselves need to be better informed as to the potential of individuals with LD so that educators can raise their own expectations for the potential achievement of these adolescents. As Milsom and Hartley (2005) contend, secondary school counsellors should play an important role in assisting students with the transition process by focusing on increasing their knowledge of disabilities, knowledge of post-secondary support services, knowledge of disability legislation, and by equipping students with the ability to self-advocate.

Three families who took a lead role in transition planning had shared values. They believed in the importance of a higher education and implemented financial resources (e.g., tutors) to enhance success in school. They also directed their adolescents to pursue their strengths and encouraged the use of accommodations and self-advocacy. Students with families who exercised this type of support found the transition experience to be successful. This finding mirrors those of Milson, Akos, and Thompson (2004) on successful transitions. Furthermore, parents chose academic paths for their children that were familiar to them, often the ones that they had followed themselves.

**Siblings.** During the transition process three of the adolescents with LD in this study experienced strained relationships with their siblings. Tucker, Updegraff, and Baril (2010) examined power and control in sibling relationships and discovered that first and second-born siblings exerted higher levels of control over younger siblings, though they believed that these relationships become more equal in the adolescent years. However, they also found that the first-born especially exerted higher levels of control over the younger siblings throughout adolescence and when the age gap was greater, the higher the control over the younger siblings. Similar situations were present in this study, which are consistent with the above research and Adler's (1927) ideas about sibling birth order.

Poor relations were due to the misunderstandings caused by a late diagnosis or because the adolescents were not achieving success independently and required excessive parental support. These issues caused their siblings to resent them because they upset the family dynamics whereby their mothers focused their time and attention on the adolescent with LD. Adolescents who experienced this strain with a sibling found it challenging to repair the relationship and they were still working on it years after the diagnosis. Having a child with a disability can be devastating to the family; however, Giallo and Gavidia-Payne (2006) discovered that the family's level of risk and resilience factors were better predictors of sibling adjustment. It is important for the family to contribute to the adjustment of the other children by minimizing stress inside the home and by giving attention to the other children. The following contributed to better sibling adjustment: parent stress, family time and routines, family problem-solving, and communication.

Turkheimer and Waldron (2000) found that siblings within the same family who have shared family experiences do not have similar personality development. The personality of two siblings can differ as any two strangers would. A shared family experience impacts siblings in different ways depending on their personality, birth order, gender, and cognitive maturity. Therefore, a shared experience will result in siblings having different interpretations of the shared event (Sulloway, 2001). For a few families in this study, the mother spoke about feeling guilty about the time spend with the adolescent with LD, in those cases, sibling relationships were strained. This finding is consistent with Dyson (2010) and her discussion on the stress on families when parenting a child with a disability. In particular, stress is caused when parents experience negative interactions with the school in term of supports given, or when the supports

do not suit the needs of the student, such as in the case of a misdiagnosis, forcing the parent to exert more attention and resources to the child with a disability. As Dyson (2010) expressed, siblings can be forced to grow up early, in particular females often take on the role of caregiver. This role was seen in the case of Laura, whose sister Violet took on the caregiver role during Laura's illness and when their mother could no longer cope. However, Violet retreated from this role once the health of her sister improved.

In this research, siblings proved the above research to be true. Birth order and gender seemed to influence the roles and expectations of siblings. Bat-Chava and Martin (2002) found that when disability was present in younger siblings it too caused strained sibling relationships. Some of the siblings in this study observed stress and anxiety in their parents owing to issues related to the younger sibling's disability. They were sensitive to this stress and developed resentment toward the sibling. This study found younger siblings to be particularly vulnerable to the negative perceptions from the older siblings as found in research by Tucker, Updegraff, and Baril (2010).

**Positive Supports and gender differences.** Litner and his colleagues (2005) found that negative experiences and feeling misunderstood by parents, guardians or school staff could be countered by developing at least one caring, supportive relationship with someone who could act as a role model. This finding proved to be the case for four of the adolescents in this study as well. In particular when the female adolescents in this study did not feel supported by a family member, they tended to withdraw from those relationships and form stronger bonds with other family members or teachers who offered kindness, support, and guidance. For example, Alice gravitated toward her sister Beth when relations with other family members became strained, Mary looked to her extended family for role models when she could not find that support in her father and brother, and Laura confided in a teacher who provided emotional support when she felt she could not find a confidant in her home. These three adolescents withdrew from family relationships that caused stress and interactions that disempowered them. Similar family dynamics were found in Litner et al. (2005).

On the other hand, Vincent and Darth felt supported by their family members and were able to rely on them for guidance, but they also looked outside their family for role models. Both boys found role models in other male teachers who would assist them either directly or indirectly in setting a career path. It is important to note that these successful relationships with teachers

were supported by their parents. Finding role models who can help the student map a career path was also found in an early study by Fullarton (2006). Vincent's technology and trades teacher had direct involvement in shaping his school program and in assisting him to settle into an apprenticeship program. Darth's experience in film camp with an inspiring teacher gave him the drive to enter into film studies. Moreover, both of these adolescents were in school placements that suited their strengths. Darth was in an arts-based school which focused on multi-modal learning experiences, furthermore, he found a social network of friends who he felt supported him. Researchers Hutchinson, Freeman, and Berg (2004) discussed the importance of adolescents with LD "hanging out" with friends to grow cognitively, socially, and physically. Isolation and depression can become a problem for adolescents with LD who do not find a network of friends (Hutchinson et al.). When Darth's mother intervened by changing his school program, because he was socially unhappy, she facilitated a pathway for him to develop friendships. Darth grew confident in himself as an eccentric fellow and he now had peer acceptance and a supportive social network. Meanwhile Alice and Laura, who did not find a group of friends who accepted them both experienced bouts of depression and withdrew socially from peers and family. Moreover, they lacked skills to develop social friendships perhaps because they did not have the practice. Transition planning in social competence skills specific to the needs of individual students as described by Hutchinson et al. (2004) might have been beneficial to the development of these students with LD.

**Transition planning.** The results of this study indicated that students and parents had limited involvement with the school regarding the transition process. None of the families in this study could speak of a detailed transition plan administered by the school. Families remarked that after the formal IPRC meeting there was no formal meeting to discuss a transition plan. Moreover, families were not familiar with the terminology regarding the transition plan. Though none of the families in this study could identify a formal transition plan or recollect attending a meeting to discuss transition planning, each family (parent and adolescent with LD) was able to describe the plans for the adolescent's transition. Four of the five families created an informal transition plan that included both adolescent and parental input. Parents communicated this plan to the school only when issues around changes to school program arose. Vincent did have a transition plan guided by his teacher; however, his parents were unaware of the terminology and did not recall that there had been a formal meeting to discuss it. Milsom (2002) found that many

school counsellors reported not being involved in transition planning for students with disabilities. Likewise, Nichols, Paul, Vandenbossche, Yaworski and Ziraldo (2003) found that though special education teachers are well versed in implementing the IEP, they are less certain of their role in implementing the transition plan. Findings from the present study are consistent with literature on the topic of poor preparation in secondary school for post-secondary experiences. Adolescents in this study had little career guidance and few experiences to explore careers in secondary school. Most of the adolescents had limited career development activities and little or no meaningful work experience. Furthermore, as Milsom and Hartley (2005) discovered, many students who have LD are not being encouraged in secondary school to pursue a college or university education.

Participants in this study described interactions with teachers who had lower expectations for their post-secondary education than the students had for themselves. When the adolescents in this study began to struggle academically, their counsellors' advice was to reduce the number of subjects being taken or drop to a lower program. These counsellors did not take the students' transition plans into consideration. Two reasons exist for taking this approach with students. First, the counsellors were not aware of the students' transition plans. Second, the counsellors seemed to doubt that the students could achieve high-level expectations. For three of the five students in this study who were planning to attend university, dropping courses or switching to a non-academic program was not advice that would help them achieve their goals. This finding suggests that the students' transition plans (whether formal or informal) did not guide the school counsellors' thinking when advising these students. Instead of taking a long-term view, school personnel appeared to recommend automatically changing the level of difficulty when confronted with a student experiencing academic difficulties. It did not seem that other options, such as accommodations, are considered. As well, like Hitchings et al (2001) and Dickinson and Verbeek (2002) found, few students with LD in this study met regularly with their counsellors to discuss transition planning. These authors also found that a significant percentage of their sample population—20%—were discouraged from pursuing higher education by their teachers and school counsellors (Hitchings et al., 2001). Moreover, the discovery by the National Longitudinal Transition Study that "only 13% of students with learning disabilities attend university or college programs compared to 53% of the general population (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2004) is troublesome in light of the fact that some students are given poor

advice from educators who do not consider long-term transition goals while making changes to students' school programs.

In four of five cases, parents and adolescents understood the consequences of a change in course level and did not take the advice which would have limited their post-school options. Instead they employed tutors, took advantage of peer study groups, and looked to family members for help with homework. One family who did not understand the consequences and who trusted the advice from the school was surprised later when the options for post-secondary education were few or non-existent. In Alice's case, general courses were dropped on the advice of a school counsellor and replaced with essential classes and her parents did not know that this result would eliminate the possibility of post-secondary education.

This study takes the above literature a bit further in finding that in some cases secondary schools may be limiting the post-secondary options of students who have learning disabilities. In the experiences of the adolescents studied, each one had a counsellor or teacher who advised them to drop out of their academic program, an action that would have limited their post-secondary options. Moreover, it suggests that schools do not believe in the ability of students who have LD to complete academic programs, pointing to lower aspirations for students with LD (Whitley et al., 2007). As shown in this study, schools appear to expect parents to direct transition planning. Fortunately, most parents in this study were informed and able to do so.

In each case, parents transitioned their children into paths with which the parents were familiar (Murray, Linden, & Kendall, 2011). Three sets of parents who attended university had the expectation that their children would attend university to open options for a professional career. Likewise, two sets of parents who had not attended post-secondary schooling expected their children to attend a shorter post-secondary program that would lead directly to gainful employment. Perhaps unintentionally, these families were involved in transitioning their adolescents which resulted in perpetuating their social class. Working class parents encouraged their adolescents to transition to a college program or to pursue a trade. In one case, university was considered a frivolous expense. In contrast, parents who attended university expected their adolescent to attend university regardless of the presence of an LD. The learning disability was not a deterrent. When asked about the prospect of their adolescent attending college, these parents said that college might be possible down the road to obtain training in a specific field, but that an undergraduate degree would be essential to their post-secondary education in order to

achieve a professional career. The above statements are reflective of working and middle class values (Murray, Kendall, and Linden, 2011). All of these parents remarked that a bachelor's degree was a start but that pursuing master's level education or other training programs would be needed to find competitive employment in the adolescent's chosen field. These expectations from parents of middle and working classes are consistent with research on the differences among middle, upper, working, and lower classes with regards to the differences in how they socialize their children through education (Murray et al., 2011; Lambert, Zeman, Allen, and Bussière, 2001).

For Vincent's working-class parents, the expectation was for their adolescent to acquire the minimum amount of school needed that would place him in a good-paying job so that he might be able to support himself within a few years after graduating from high school. This is consistent with findings from, Lambert, Zeman, Allen, and Bussière (2001). In secondary school, his parents, a teacher, and Vincent had a plan and a path set; however, once Vincent graduated he was directed into a job with little room to develop other interests or to change course. The parents of Laura, Darth, and Mary had middle class occupations and encouraged their adolescents to pursue university educations that would open doors; the experience of going to university was the focus for the adolescent to find a suitable career path. This search can take several years. Then more education may be needed to train for a specific career path. Often this path is open-ended and involves jobs that require higher-order thinking skills and opportunities for advancement (Murray, Linden, & Kendall, 2011).

An important consideration is that the LD label was not the factor holding students back from pursuing higher education and attaining competitive employment. A number of determinants—the family's expectations, the family's influence during development and the way the family encouraged and discouraged certain values—factored into the decisions that students make regarding their transition plans more than considerations about ability and potential. As Wagner et al (2005) and Reis, Neu, and McGuires (1997) found, high expectations in the home and community will lead to high achievement and goal setting by the student. Specifically, the expectations that parents have for the educational pursuits or employment opportunities for their adolescent children “help shape students' attitude and behaviours toward their schooling” (Wagner et al., 2005, p. 2). Interestingly, all middle-class families in this research remarked that their adolescents could fall back on teaching as a possible career. In contrast, Vincent remarked

that one day he would like to be able to teach technology and trades classes in secondary school. To him, teaching was a worthy long-term goal to which he aspired. All families seemed to understand that some form of education would be needed to ensure that the adolescents were perpetuating their social class (Murray, Linden & Kendall, 2011).

To compensate for Alice's lack of training, the parents in this case opted to have the adolescent apply to the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) hoping that she would be put on an allowance or given some type of job training. Consistent with the finding, parents socialize their children into paths that they themselves know (Murray et al., 2011); these parents transitioned their adolescent to this path because it had been a successful route for this adolescent's mother.

One transition activity that each family described as beneficial was to develop skills and connections through co-operative education placements. Vincent was the only participant able to take part in them. The three university-bound adolescents and parents expressed an interest; however, they were denied access because this opportunity was seen by the schools as appropriate only for students in the non-academic stream. Although Alice took some essentials-level courses, she was also denied access to this co-op program.

In terms of the educational expectations that adolescents with LD have for themselves, the educational and employment values that parents had for them impacted the goals that they chose for themselves. The values of the parents were embedded into the adolescent since early childhood. Adolescents could not recollect a specific conversation about college or university or about what type of job they should have while in early childhood; however, four said that they understood they would follow in the paths of their parents. Parents telling stories about their educational experiences gave the adolescents the idea that they too would follow in their parents' footsteps. Murray and his colleagues (2011) contend that this is how individuals are socialized into one path or another. Adolescents take on the values of the parent as their own. In cases where parents had university degrees, the adolescents looked to their parents as role models for what they too could achieve. If their parents had graduate degrees, they also aspired to and planned to pursue graduate school. In cases where parents did not attend university or college, adolescents looked at the attainment of a college degree as something that would make their parents proud. Adolescents in this study recognised that they would need training after secondary school to find competitive employment. Furthermore, adolescents had the expectation that they

would live up to all parental expectations and that they would follow along the path of any older siblings. As with the expectations of parents, the adolescents were not deterred by the presence of an LD. If anything two of them felt the need to prove their abilities to themselves, peers, teachers and family. It was something with which they were learning to cope; however, an LD did not limit their expectations or aspirations. Most of the students had realistic aspirations. However, one adolescent had expectations for education that could not be fulfilled considering her high school program. Her desire to follow the path to college that her sisters had taken would not be possible. She was the only student who was unprepared to transition to post-secondary education or employment.

**IEP process.** Further to the above findings, adolescents and parents said they did not participate in a discussion of a transition plan or further discussion on the IEP. After the initial IPRC meeting neither family member could recall a yearly meeting to discuss the IEP or transition plan documents. This finding is consistent with research done by Williams and O'Leary (2001) who concluded that students tend not to be invited to participate in their own IEP process. As well, students felt lost in terms of their rights and responsibilities as far as accommodations, modifications, and services were concerned. This notion of feeling lost was also found in research on transition planning by Martin and colleagues (2006). Moreover, they showed that more than half of the students did not feel well-informed by the school about their disability or possible services. Furthermore, Schreiner (2007) asserted that many students do not recollect ever seeing their IEP.

## **Summary**

The reciprocal relationship between expectations and experiences was evident in three cases where parents had clearly set a university education as the post-school goal for their children. These expectations were adopted by the adolescents, but in the cases of the two girls who had a later diagnosis, there was some question as to whether they could achieve these goals before their diagnosis. However, once the mental health issues subsided and their grades improved, the original expectations of a university education guided their experiences in high school. On the other hand, the parents of Vincent and Alice initially had no clear post-school expectations for their children. In Vincent's case a teacher guided his experiences and these vocationally-oriented experiences then influenced his parents to adopt similar expectations for their son. Regrettably, Alice's high school experiences did not include a teacher who initiated a

transition plan, and her parents adopted low expectations for her. In all cases, parents' expectations ultimately influenced their children's post-school outcomes.

### **Secondary Questions**

#### **1. What at the microsystem (adolescent-family) level facilitated or created barriers to successful transitions for students who have LD into post-secondary education or employment?**

The microsystem included interactions between two people or dyads. These dyads incorporate all interactions concerning the adolescent with LD, such as, interactions that the adolescent with LD had with their primary care givers, teachers, siblings, friends, and community.

**Facilitators.** Four adolescents began to consider transition plans because they were involved in discussion with parents about career goals. This awareness, open discussions, and setting high expectations were important to helping these students manage their school program. Moreover, all mothers in this study facilitated the academic success of their adolescent with LD through advocacy and homework support. The importance of having high expectations for LD students was also found in data from the NTLs-2 (Wagner et al, 2005).

A few adolescents followed in the footsteps of the older sibling(s) who held part-time jobs or who attended college or university. In cases where the siblings were older, the adolescents with LD expected to follow a similar path to their siblings.

**Barriers.** All adolescents in this study physically and emotionally withdrew from school when they did not feel accepted by a peer group and or by teachers in school and had difficulty communicating with family members, to varying degrees. To compensate, one parent became more protective and obsessive in their care giving activities, leading the adolescent to withdraw further and/or participate in "learned helpless" behaviours. When parents participated in defensive advocacy; by justifying the learned helpless behaviours of their adolescent with LD, this created conflict with school staff, within the family, between parents, and among siblings.

During discussions with three mothers, it became clear that, when the health of their adolescent was a concern, the mental, physical, and emotional resources of the mother were exhausted. Discussions on this topic cause all three of these mothers to break down in tears during the interview sessions. In all three cases these were the mothers of the girls. These

mothers experienced burnout and mental exhaustion after seeing their child through their health issues. One parent sought professional help to get through the experience.

## **2. What at the mesosystem (interactions between student, school, home) level facilitated or created a barrier to successful transitions for students with learning disabilities into post-secondary education or employment?**

The mesosystem included a triadic interaction. It incorporates a dyad such as mother/child interaction as well as a third party, such as, spouses, teachers, relatives, and neighbours. In this study the mesosystem involves interactions between the adolescent, family member, and the school. These triadic interactions have a direct impact on the child.

**Facilitators.** In three cases marital relationships were strengthened when the fathers supported their wives' decisions regarding their children and when they allowed their wives to take a leading role in advocating with the school.

Parents who attended university, were most involved in noticing the academic difficulties of their child. They were continually involved in information seeking throughout their child's education. They communicated with school staff on equal terms rather than waiting for guidance to come from the school. These parents also continually monitored their child's school program to ensure that it reflected their goals for transitioning to university. As Wagner et al. (2005) discovered in their analysis of longitudinal data, parents who have high expectations also tend to provide financial and emotional support, as well as the advocacy needed to help their adolescent achieve those expectations.

In this research, mothers advocated for their adolescents in different ways. During the data analysis three types of advocacy emerged: active, proactive, and defensive. Active advocates were able to take advice from the school and incorporate it into their transition planning. For the parents of Laura, Vincent, and Mary, relationships with the school were supportive as the active advocate tracked their adolescents' progress. Proactive advocates worked with the school, but pursued individual plans beyond what was available from the school. The proactive advocate was involved in teaching and sharing information with school staff and able to take and incorporate advice. This type of advocate looked beyond the school for supports. Darth's mother was involved in researching appropriate post-secondary institutions that would meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of Darth. This type of advocate was a risk-taker, looking outside of the school for ways to support her child, making investments in

tutors and technology and looking into avenues that would help the adolescent develop his strengths. Mothers who engaged in active and especially proactive advocacy had an informed relationship with the school and had adolescents who experienced the most success.

Defensive advocacy was found in the case of Alice. Her mother became frustrated with what she perceived as a lack of support from the school and she engaged in protective advocacy behaviours which included: speaking on behalf of the adolescent; completing homework for the adolescent; not allowing the adolescent to make independent decisions; monitoring the activities of the adolescent very closely; allowing the adolescent to engage in learned helplessness behaviours; and becoming involved in an adversarial relationship with school staff, all of these behaviours led to a hostile climate which influenced the adolescent. This adolescent learned that she did not have to respect the authority of school staff and furthermore, her learned helplessness coping mechanism was being reinforced in her home.

Self-advocacy by the adolescent with LD was an important factor in achieving the transition goals. Four adolescents were able to self-advocate ensuring that any changes to their school program would not negatively affect their transition goals. In contrast to the findings of Jania and Costenbader (2002), most of the students in this study were able to effectively self-advocate at the secondary level, and had a plan to disclose their LD once in university in order to retain services. Only one student in this study did not have enough confidence to self-advocate effectively. As Janiga and Costenbaden (2002) found, when adolescents were not able to self-advocate, they were also not able to prepare for post-secondary studies. This finding was corroborated in this study as heavy reliance on parental advocacy became debilitating and learned helplessness produced a situation where one adolescent could not successfully transition to a post-secondary institution or to employment.

A second facilitator was a supportive teacher. When an adolescent had a teacher who took the initiative to advise a student toward a career path the student flourished. In Vincent's case, he was open to this advice, able to show competencies in his work, had a strong work ethic, demonstrated eagerness to follow through in the transition plan, and was supported by school staff. As a result, he was able to achieve a successful transition which suited his strengths. Without the informed guidance from his teacher, Vincent may not have found that particular career path on his own as his parents were not familiar with the process of apprenticeship and admitted that they had not considered that route. In the cases of the two working class families,

they were aiming to transition their children into one or two year college/apprentice programs that would lead the adolescent to a working class occupation. The three middle class families were transitioning their children to university in order to gain the qualifications needed to obtain a middle class occupation. Parents' plan for their adolescent included perpetuating their social class through education and employment. This finding is consistent with research in social psychology (Murray et al., 2011).

**Barriers.** Strained parental relationships stemming from parents' misunderstanding of the needs of the adolescent also caused a barrier. In these cases, it seemed natural for family members to attribute the failure to the adolescents' character, thinking of them as lazy, unmotivated, or "dumb" (Litner et al. 2005). Moreover, when the adolescent continued to be unsuccessful in school and the idea of a misdiagnosis was present, it became difficult for the parent to find a supportive professional who would consider retesting the adolescent. Hence, already having a label of LD paired with an adolescent who was uncooperative with school staff, may have stood in the way of the family's ability to find appropriate supports for the child.

### **3. What at the exosystem (triadic interactions) level facilitated or created barriers to successful transitions for students with learning disabilities into postsecondary education or employment?**

The exosystem includes interactions that do not directly involve the child, but that do have an indirect influence on the child's development. For example, an argument between the child's mother and her spouse about finances does not directly include the child, but the stress of the interaction and the result of the interaction may have an impact on the development of the child. As well, the workplace of the mother often does not involve the child by events that happen to the mother in the workplace, such as working overtime, may have a direct impact on the child.

**Facilitators.** For Vincent, a co-operative education placement helped to define his career path. Co-operative education gave him work experiences and helped him build connections within the community. While each of the families felt that those experiences would have benefitted their adolescent, they were not always pursued. As Briel and Getzel (2005) and Hitchings and Retish (2000) found, students with disabilities typically have limited career development activities and little or no meaningful work experience. Furthermore, many parents in this study did not emphasize the importance of work experience over social and academic

activities for their adolescents. School work took precedence because most of these families were focused on graduation from an academic program that would facilitate the transition plan. However, parents appreciated that valuable skills could be learned on the job, such as responsibility and the development of organizational skills, and would have liked their adolescent to have had this experience as part of their course requirements in a cooperative education program. This experience would have helped them to build connections within their community and to learn new skills. Furthermore, Vincent had the opportunity to participate in a school program that would lead him to a vocation which would provide him with secure employment. In terms of an occupation for Alice, her interests were more domestic, sewing and cooking classes. Females are less likely to go into skilled labour professions and while Alice enjoyed fixing things with her father, she was not encouraged to pursue a skilled trade by her parents or her teachers.

**Barriers.** One barrier was the limited space in co-operative education programs which resulted in four adolescents not having the opportunity to build connections and to learn new skills in a community work placement. Placements such as these might have given some adolescents the opportunity to experience a career possibility. These schools did not prioritize a co-operative education placement for students in the academic stream.

A second barrier was the lack of communication between the home and the school. This study showed that although at times the school and family would come together to discuss the adolescents' progress, the fact is that in four of five cases, the two groups kept quite separate and did not discuss details concerning transition planning. Milson (2002) found that only 68% of secondary school counsellors played a role in transition planning for students with disabilities. As Milsom and Hartley (2005) state, a quality transition program needs to include secondary school counsellors who play a large role in assisting students with the transition process by increasing their knowledge of disabilities, post-secondary support services, and disability legislation, as well as by equipping students with the ability to self-advocate.

#### **4. What at the macrosystem (society) level facilitates or creates barriers to successful transitions for students with learning disabilities into post-secondary education or employment?**

The macrosystem refers to the social and cultural context within which individuals live. Bronfenbrenner (1979) makes the case that though cultures and subcultures are different with

respect to values, beliefs, rules, and laws; we all have roles within this context and are impacted by decisions made on a societal and global level.

**Facilitators.** The adolescents in this study were guided in their decisions about their future based on what they saw the people around them do. The adolescents chose role models, people to whom they connected and whom they admired, based on a lifestyle that looked appealing to them and was in line with parental expectations. These adolescents were guided into careers that looked appealing from the outside, such as, film studies to become a director and law school to make lots of money.

Having experiences to make connections in the community played a role in the level of direct transition planning that one adolescent received. This family credited the rural school setting as being able to provide more support for their son than an urban one. Furthermore, another student connected to her local Learning Disability Association (LDA) chapter, became informed about learning disabilities and used her experiences to tell her story to other students who are at the stage of transitioning. Moreover, the connection that each family had with each school proved to be an important facilitator or barrier for these families.

**Barriers.** A barrier was the limited understanding that educators had about the potential for achievement in students who have LD. As well, cultural connections to the term “disability” created negative associations for some parents, adolescents and teachers. Lastly, some families experienced problems having the school schedule an assessment for their child or adolescent. Issues of practicality and fiscal responsibility among educators played a role in creating barriers for the adolescent to obtain a timely assessment and smooth transition.

## **Summary**

At the microsystem level, relationships between family members were supportive to the adolescent when family members showed acceptance for the LD label as an important vehicle by which to advocate for accommodations for their son or daughter. Moreover, adolescents began to consider transition plans because they were involved in discussions with parents about career goals. Adolescents tended to strive to reach the expectations that their parents had for their post-secondary education or employment goals.

Mothers in this study advocated for their adolescents in different ways. Those who were engaged in being an active advocate and being a proactive advocate had adolescents who experienced the most successful transition. One mother who engaged in defensive advocacy had

a daughter who participated in learned helplessness behaviours and who withdrew from social and family life.

At the mesosystem level, marital relationships were strengthened when fathers supported the mother's decisions regarding their children. This support created a cohesive family unit. Strained parental relationships, owing to the fact that both parents misunderstood the needs of the adolescent, caused breaks in family cohesion. Siblings were especially sensitive to stress in the family system and could be critical of the adolescent with LD.

In some families, educators and parents did not communicate about the transition goals of the adolescent with LD. In cases where parents were well informed of appropriate steps to transitions, the transition process was smooth and informal. Informal because in several cases, school counsellors were unaware of the transition plans decided by the adolescent and their family.

At the exosystem level, career development activities were effective in directing one adolescent into a career path. The skills learned in the workplace and the connections made within the community opened an employment opportunity for this adolescent. Unfortunately, students in the academic stream were unable to take these courses due to limited placements available. However, all adolescents and parents remarked that the adolescent would have benefited from the work experience given in program.

At the macrosystem level, facilitators included adolescents' desire to find a role model whom they could emulate and follow in their footsteps. Adolescents chose individuals with whom they had something in common and admired.

## Chapter 11- Conclusions

In this chapter, contributions to knowledge and theory, limitations, and implications for practice are described. Suggestions for future research are made, and final thoughts are expressed.

### **Contributions of this Research:**

**Knowledge.** This study points to the inadequacies of transition planning services in Ontario schools and the lack of teacher and administration preparation for this endeavour. Telling the adolescent to switch to a lower academic program as the first course of action is counter intuitive to those procedures used to educate exceptional students. When a student with a LD struggles academically, supports are put in place to bridge the gap. Therefore, a drop in program should not be considered an accommodation. When the students in this study who refused to drop their academic courses gained support through other means, such as tutors, they found success in their courses. This is an example of an accommodation that led to a successful transition. However, this accommodation was not offered by the school unless the student or the family advocated for it. A procedure needs to be in place to aid in the delivery of transition services starting with, direct communication with parents in grade 9, to understand the goals that the adolescent and parents have for the education and employment of the adolescent to ensure a successful transition. Moreover, a school counsellor should make sure that the school placement continues to reflect these goals through the adolescent's high school education.

Researchers Skinner and Lindstrom (2003) itemized 10 strategies that contributed to successful transitions for students who have learning disabilities. They include the teaching of self-advocacy and of coping strategies needed at the post-secondary education level—time management and organization skills; giving students information about their LD by showing them their psycho-educational assessment and explaining its meaning; and encouraging self-identification at their post-secondary institutions. This study also found some of these strategies to be effective. However, this study did not find evidence that all of these transition strategies were learned in the school environment. For example, none of the adolescents in this study had ever been given an explanation as how their LD affected them. Moreover, none had been guided through their psychological assessments to understand their meaning. At different points in the interviews with the adolescents they all referred to themselves as *dumb*, *slow*, or *stupid*— they felt inferior. Only one was aware of the definition of LD and the others struggled with the idea

“that LD means lazy and dumb” (Lavioe, 1994). Therefore, implementing a program to educate students who have LD, as well as educators and parents about how to be successful with this disability would be beneficial in aiding in the transition planning for these students.

This research points to the importance of parental education at the point of identification of their child or adolescent, in order to make them aware of the lead role they have in advocating for services and supports for their child. They need to set early and realistic goals for their child or adolescent that they will monitor. Moreover, parents need to be aware that their expectations for their child’s education and employment will influence the academic decisions the adolescent will make. The bar may be appropriately set for these adolescents by their parents, but, parents may also act as barriers if the bar is set too low, limiting the adolescent’s potential for post-secondary education and employment.

In terms of advocacy, three types of advocacy were found among these participants: active, proactive, and defensive. Mothers who advocated in an active manner facilitated the transition process by setting expectations and by monitoring the experiences of their adolescents. One mother who advocated in a proactive manner, sought out new information and created learning experiences for her son. Both of these types of advocacy led the adolescent to a successful transition. One mother advocated for her daughter through defensive advocacy, this type of advocacy led to an adversarial relationship between the home and school. Furthermore, the adolescent in this case was not able to connect to teachers who might have been able to provide support.

**Theory.** This study supports the work of Bronfenbrenner’s *Ecology of Human Development*, Systems Theory (1979) as well as Family Systems Theory (Turnbull and Turnbull, 1997). The individuals studied were influenced by the systems described by Bronfenbrenner. At the microsystem level, parental expectations had the greatest impact on student outcomes. These parental expectations came from the parents’ own experiences in the school system. At the mesosystem level, each family member held distinct roles and responsibilities within the family, and these interactions proved to facilitate or to create barriers to the adolescents’ transition. Differences were found among the families in terms of advocacy, work ethic, sibling relationships, and parental relationships which all factored into the success or failure of the adolescents transition. As well, all participants found that limits were placed on their educational experiences based on exosystem factors, such as, few opportunities at the school level for

employment training. Furthermore, on the macrosystem level, social class appeared to factor in to the expectations that parents had for their adolescents' post-secondary education. These adolescents adopted their parents' expectations and their transition decisions were also affected by role models within their own family or their community.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study was that little information was found about how adolescents with LD transition to employment. Because the participants in this study were all preparing a transition to some type of post-secondary education, and though the researcher discovered the indirect plans that adolescents had with regard to future employment, the study did not enlighten the audience or the researcher as to how adolescents with LD plan a direct transition into employment. Furthermore, it may be a sign of the value in our culture, that all of these participants and their families expected a transition to post-secondary education, regardless of appropriate transition planning for this event or ability level of the adolescent. The researcher found it difficult to find participants who had planned a direct transition to employment and therefore an analysis of that transition was not a focus of this study. A second limitation, was that the research did not collect data regarding the perspectives of the school, including teachers and guidance counsellors, on their experiences and expectations for the transitions of students who have LD.

Another limitation of this research comes from the process of collecting and analysing data. The researcher adopted a social constructivist approach, therefore, because one researcher conducted all of the interviews with each participant, the direction of content covered as well as the analysis of the data was filtered through the researcher as she was an active participant in the data collection process and involved in the creation of making meaning from the experience. Her interpretation of the data was influenced by the conversations had with participants, including both verbal and non-verbal cues. Moreover, those verbal and non-verbal interactions and how the researcher perceived them came out in her analysis of the raw data as she described the intended meaning of the participants' experiences. To ensure that the researcher represented the participants' true statements and intent, each participant had the opportunity to review, correct, and return the interview transcripts.

## **Implications for Practice**

Wagner and Blackorby (1996) suggested that “perhaps the greatest positive contribution schools can make to the post-school success of student with disabilities is to contribute to the in-school success of those students, regardless of the placement of their courses.” (p. 118). This study points out potential flaws in the transition of students who have LD. Therefore the following recommendations came from the findings of this study and are aimed at enhancing supports for transition planning in the public education system.

**Educators.** This study points to the need for informed guidance counselling in assisting students during the transition process that includes direct parental and student input in order to meets the goals and expectations that the family and adolescent have for the transition. Milsom and Hartley (2005) state that “successful transition to college opens the door for future economic success, social power, and personal well-being” (p.437), yet individuals with LD are often seen in low-paying jobs with little security or opportunity for advancement (Dickinson & Verbeek, 2002). Educators need better training in the secondary level in how to support exceptional students.

**Parents.** Moreover, involving parents in training sessions on how to facilitate their adolescents’ transition to employment or post-secondary education can be facilitated by local LD support groups and would be beneficial. Parental involvement and/or guidance from a well-informed teacher during the transition proved to be the factor that kept one adolescent on track. The parents in this study who showed an active presence in the school built relationships with teachers, these teachers were willing to put the extra time in to support students’ goals. This became a reciprocal relationship. Therefore, hosting activities that encourage parental involvement may also open the doors to discussing transition planning.

**Students.** Furthermore, the adolescent themselves need to be educated about learning disabilities and their own strengths and weaknesses. The findings of this study showed that parental expectations directed the adolescents’ path, however, if parents themselves did not know what was possible for their adolescent they led the adolescent down a dead end road. Therefore, adolescents need to be taught and encouraged to take the necessary steps to self-advocate for their program needs. Self-advocacy comes from having confidence in your abilities and awareness of your weaknesses (Higgins et al., 2002). This confidence has to be fostered through being given an education about what is possible to achieve with a learning disability.

## **Suggestions for Future Research**

**Siblings.** One interesting theme that emerged from this study was new awareness of sibling relationships and the impact of gender on sibling relationships. A study that looks more in-depth at the late diagnosis of LD on sibling relationships would enlighten the small pool of research on these individuals. This study pointed to tensions among siblings and the reasons for these. However, taking a closer look at the phenomenon of supportive versus unsupportive relationships in the home would guide a better understanding of how and why expectations can be low or high for individuals who have learning disabilities.

**Gender.** In further studies, it would be interesting to investigate whether gender played a role in the type of support given to adolescents. It so happens that in this study, the males expressed having higher levels of support from teachers and parents and they talked less about negative experiences in school. Some females also had lots of support from teachers and parents however, the females in this study talked about as many negative experiences in school as positive ones. It led me to wonder if the school experiences were equally positive and negative for both genders, but perhaps the information gathered during the interview process with the two genders differed. Maybe female and male perspectives differ in terms of how reflective they are of their experiences and of how much detail they offer during the interview process. Moreover, the males in this study participated in face-to-face interview sessions, so perhaps the physical presence of the interviewer made the participant filter their responses more so than in an interview conducted over the telephone.

**Advocacy.** This study found three different types of advocates: active, protective and defensive. Further research to determine if these types have relevance to a greater population would be informative. Moreover, characteristics could be further delineated and perhaps other types discovered.

**School Perspectives.** This study uncovered some interesting themes in the lives of identified students. The interview data was rich and looked in-depth at the experiences of five adolescents and their family members during the transition process. This research was effective in giving a snap-shot of the challenges encountered when transitioning identified students in Ontario, but to understand the relevance of these themes to students across Canada and even North America, it would be beneficial to use a larger number of participants and a different

research design from various regions. Moreover, it would be beneficial to include the perspectives of the school team in the research.

### **Final Thoughts**

One of the lessons I learned while collecting the data for this study was the idea that whether you are a student or a parent you cannot abdicate your responsibilities to make informed decisions about your education or your child's education and future. As an educator I am sure that teachers have good intentions regarding their students' outcomes, however, many are not personally invested in their student's future. Research has shown that teachers do not have high aspirations for the achievement of their students with LD (Whitley et al., 2007). Moreover, this study shows that educators are too willing to lower expectations by lowering the academic program when students with LD struggle academically.

What I learned over the last several years while writing this thesis is that it is a complicated process. What seemed like a linear path in the beginning became a web circling around and around, and I was spider in the middle trying to catch all of the information in order to build up the structure of my web. One question answered led to five more questions needing to be explored. In the end, I know so much more about this topic that I am so passionate about, that is to understand what impact, positive and negative, does a learning disability have on an individual and how to be successful with one. However, the irony is that now I know more than I did, but I also know that I have so much more to explore. In future, I would like to look more deeply at sibling relationships and the effect of personality development of individuals who have LD. I also want to explore the types of advocacy that I discovered in this research and to develop them more thoroughly.

Overall, conducting this research has been one of the most challenging endeavours in which I have engaged. However, with support from others and my own sheer determination my personal expectations for academic achievement were realized.

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## Appendices

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**Appendix A**  
**List of Key Terms**

## **Definitions of Key Terminology:**

**Exceptionality-** The use of the term "exceptional pupil" is required by the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training and means "a pupil whose behavioural, communication, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities are such that the pupil is considered to need placement in a special education program by a committee of the board."

Following is an overview of the Ministry categories of exceptionalities and definitions:

- Behaviour
- Communication- (Autism, Deaf & Hard of Hearing, Language Impairment, Speech Impairment & Learning Disability)
- Intellectual- (Giftedness, Mild Intellectual Disability, Developmental Disability)
- Physical- (Physical Disability, Blind or Low Vision)
- Multiple- (Multiple Exceptionalities)

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2012, October, 23). Retrieved from <http://www.lkdsb.net/Speced/exceptionalities.htm>

**Learning Disability (LD)-** The Ontario Ministry of Education defines learning disability as:

A learning disorder evident in both academic and social. situations that involves one or more of the processes necessary for the proper use of spoken language or the symbols of communication, and that is characterized by a condition that:

-results in a significant discrepancy between academic achievement and assessed intellectual ability, with defects in one or more of:

- i. receptive language (i.e., listening, reading);
- ii. language processing (i.e., thinking, conceptualizing, integrating);
- iii. expressive language (i.e., talking, spelling writing);
- iv. mathematical computations

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013, April, 22). Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/8.html>

**Individual Education Plan (IEP)-** An IEP is a written plan describing the special education program and/or services required by a particular student. It identifies learning expectations that are modified from or alternative to the expectations given in the curriculum policy document for the appropriate grade and subject or course, and/or any accommodations and special education services needed to assist the student in achieving his or her learning expectations.

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2012, October, 23). Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/iep/iep.html>

**Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC)**- Exceptional pupils are identified as such by an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC). Upon receiving a written request from a student's parent(s)/guardian(s), the principal of the school must refer the student to an IPRC. The IPRC will decide whether the student is an exceptional pupil and, if so, what type of educational placement is appropriate. The principal may also, on written notice to the parent(s)/guardian(s), refer the student to an IPRC. The parent(s)/guardian(s), as well as a student who is sixteen years of age or older, have the right to attend the IPRC meeting and may request that the IPRC discuss potential programs that would meet the student's needs. On the basis of these discussions, the IPRC can recommend the special education programs and/or services that it considers to be appropriate for the student.

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2012, October, 23). Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/identifi.html>

**Transition Plan**- the school's written plan to assist the student in making a successful transition from school to work, further education, and community living.

For the student and his or her family and personal support network, the transition plan:

- identifies goals for work, further education, and community living that:

- Reflect actual opportunities and resources that are likely to be available after the student leaves school

- Are achievable by the student given appropriate supports

- defines the actions that are necessary year by year to help the student achieve his or her goals

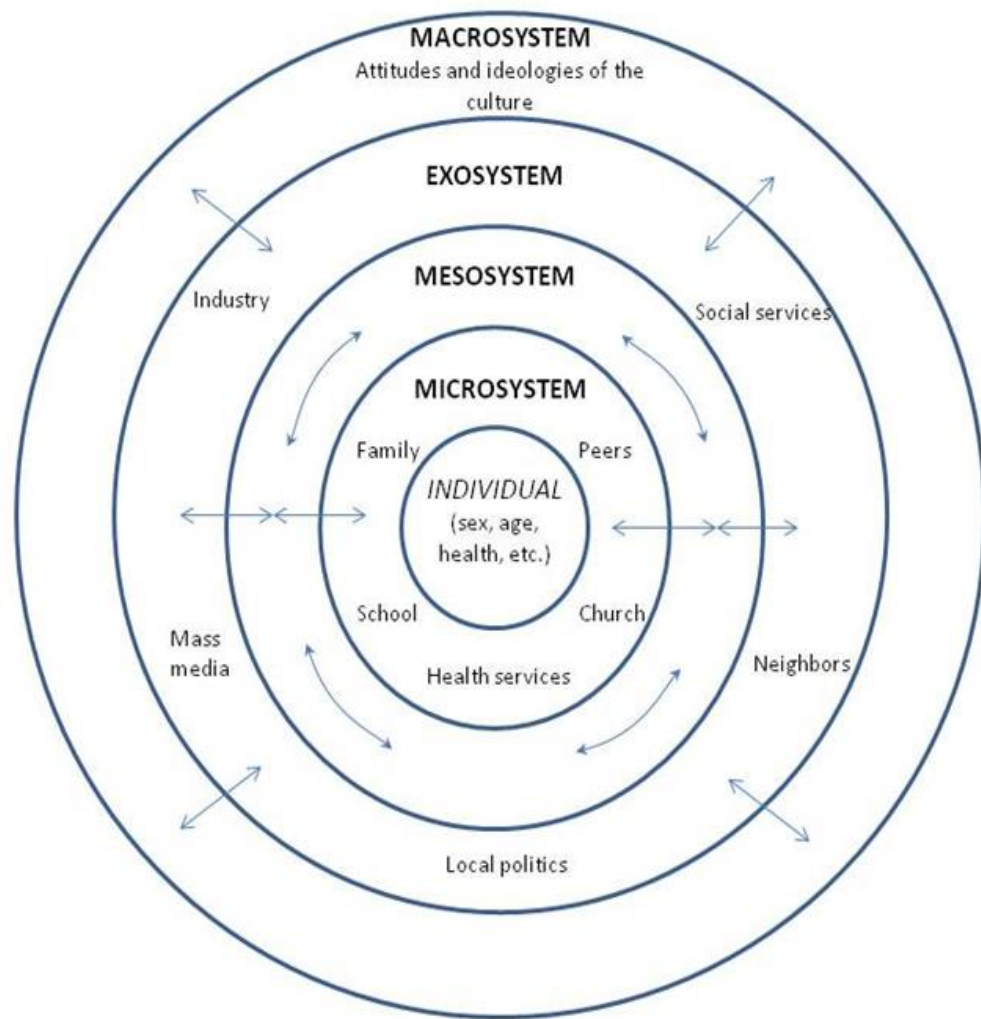
- clarifies the roles and responsibilities of the student, family, and others in carrying out these actions.

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2012, October, 23). Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/transiti/transition.html>

## **Appendix B: Theoretical Framework**

### **Bronfenbrenner's Ecology of Human Development**

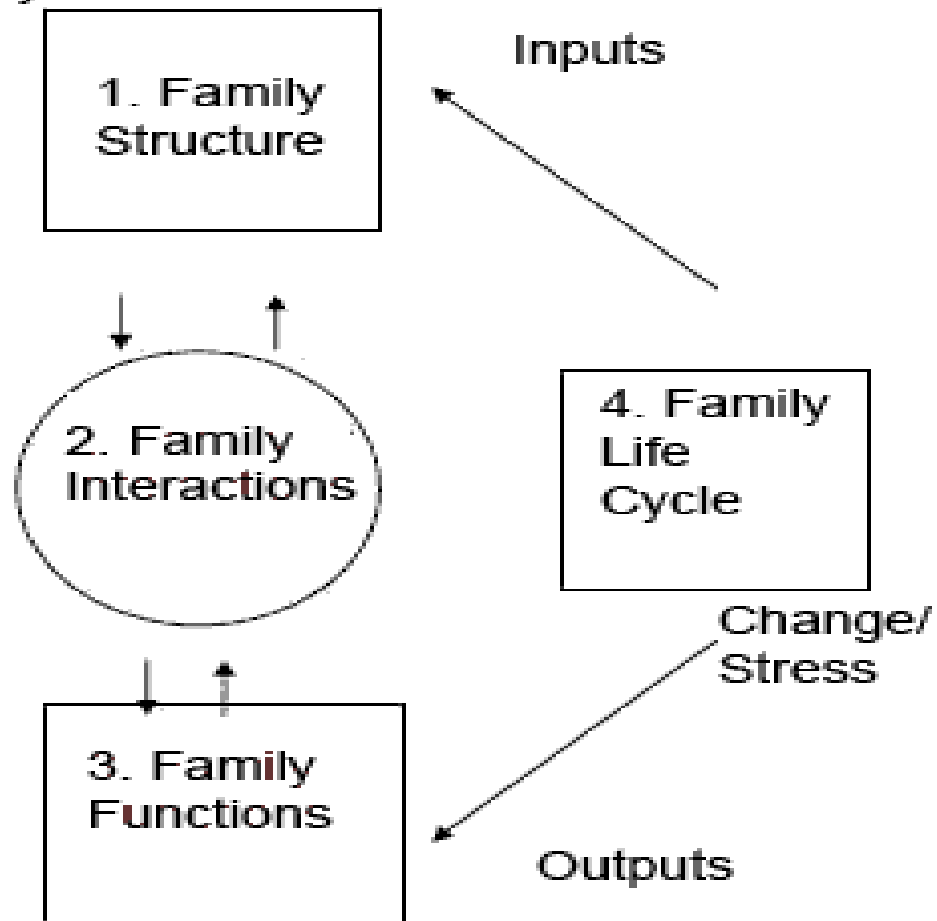
Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory



## **Appendix C: Theoretical Framework**

### **Turnbull and Turnbull's Family Systems Theory**

# Family System



**Appendix D**

**Recruitment Notice for Participants**

## **Transition Experiences of Students who have Learning Disabilities from Secondary School into Employment or Postsecondary Education**

I am conducting a study on the transition experiences of students who have learning disabilities as they transition from secondary school into postsecondary education or employment. I am recruiting adolescents currently in grade 11 or 12 who have been diagnosed with a learning disability and who are in the process of making the transition from secondary school to postsecondary education or employment. I am looking for English speaking participants who have received accommodations, services or programs while in their elementary and/or secondary school program. I am also recruiting parents or caregivers, and siblings who can provide their experiences as to the transition experiences of the adolescent.

Each participant will be asked to participate in a series of three interviews, lasting anywhere from 30 to 60 minutes. As well, one parent or caregiver will be asked to complete a questionnaire that will take between 30-45 minutes. The interview and questionnaire will ask questions concerning each participant's role in the transition process. The interviews will be face to face or telephone interviews and will be held at a time and place convenient for the participants. They will be audiotape and typed transcripts will be sent to each participant to be edited and approved. Anonymity will be insured through the use of pseudonyms for names and places.

These data are being collected for the purposes of a PhD dissertation that will result the publishing of a journal article and will not be used for any other purpose.

If you have any further questions or if you would like to participate in this research project please contact me. I will mail a copy of the questionnaire to you with a copy of the consent forms and we can discuss a date for our interview session.

**Appendix E**  
**Consent Forms**

## Consent Form for Parents

### Title of Study:

Transition Experiences of Students with Learning Disabilities from Secondary School into Employment or Post Secondary Education

**Invitation to Participate:** I am invited to participate in the above mentioned research study conducted by \_\_\_\_\_.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of the study is to identify conditions that act as facilitators and barriers to the transition of students with learning disabilities from secondary school into post secondary education or employment.

**Participation:** My participation will consist essentially of completing a questionnaire and participating in three face to face or telephone interviews each lasting an hour and a half during which I will be asked to answer questions about my child's school experiences. **Interviews will be recorded and I may choose not to have my interview recorded or I may cease the recording at any point during the interview.** The interview sessions will take place at a time and in a location convenient for myself. I will also be asked to complete a questionnaire that may take up to one hour to complete.

**Risks:** My participation in this study will entail that I volunteer very personal information, and this may cause me to feel emotional discomfort, which may, at times, be difficult. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these occurrences **by stopping the interview if it becomes too difficult and by skipping questions that I do not want to answer.** The researcher will attempt to be aware of any discomfort that I may feel and will address it as necessary.

**Benefits:** My participation in this study will advance current understanding of how individuals with learning disabilities transition from secondary school into employment or post secondary educational pursuits.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity:** I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for a doctoral dissertation and article publication and that my confidentiality will be protected and that no information that can identify me will be published or made public. My anonymity will be protected through the use of pseudonyms of names and places.

**Conservation of Data:** The data collected including tape recordings of interviews, transcripts, and questionnaires will be kept in a secure manner and will be stored and kept secure for a minimum of five years and will be accessible to only the researcher and the supervisor for this research.

**Voluntary Participation:** I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be destroyed.

**Acceptance:** I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the above research study.  
If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa.

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's Name:

Participant's signature:

Date:

Witness:

Signature:

Date:

Researcher's Name:

Researcher's Signature:

Date:

## Consent Form for Adolescents with Learning Disabilities

### Title of Study:

Transition Experiences of Students with Learning Disabilities from Secondary School into Employment or Post Secondary Education

**Invitation to Participate:** I am invited to participate in the above mentioned research study conducted by \_\_\_\_\_.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of the study is to identify conditions that act as facilitators and barriers to the transition of students with learning disabilities from secondary school into post secondary education or employment.

**Participation:** My participation will consist essentially of participating in three face to face or telephone interviews each lasting an hour and a half during which I will be asked to answer questions about my school experiences. **Interviews will be recorded and I may choose not to have my interview recorded or I may cease the recording at any point during the interview.** The interview sessions will take place at a time and in a location convenient for myself.

**Risks:** My participation in this study will entail that I volunteer very personal information, and this may cause me to feel emotional discomfort, which may, at times, be difficult. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these occurrences **by stopping the interview if it becomes too difficult and by skipping questions that I do not want to answer.** The researcher will attempt to be aware of any discomfort that I may feel and will address it as necessary.

**Benefits:** My participation in this study will advance current understanding of how individuals with learning disabilities transition from secondary school into employment or post secondary educational pursuits.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity:** I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for a doctoral dissertation and article publication and that my confidentiality will be protected and that no information that can identify me will be published or made public. My anonymity will be protected through the use of pseudonyms of names and places.

**Conservation of Data:** The data collected including tape recordings of interviews and transcripts will be kept in a secure manner and will be stored and kept secure for a minimum of five years and will be accessible to only the researcher and the supervisor for this research.

**Voluntary Participation:** I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be destroyed.

**Acceptance:** I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the above research study.  
If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa.

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's Name:

Participant's signature:

Date:

Witness:

Signature:

Date:

Researcher's Name:

Researcher's Signature:

Date:

## Consent Form for Sibling

### Title of Study:

Transition Experiences of Students with Learning Disabilities from Secondary School into Employment or Post Secondary Education

**Invitation to Participate:** I am invited to participate in the above mentioned research study conducted by \_\_\_\_\_.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of the study is to identify conditions that act as facilitators and barriers to the transition of students with learning disabilities from secondary school into post secondary education or employment.

**Participation:** My participation will consist essentially of participating in three face to face or telephone interviews each lasting an hour and a half during which I will be asked to answer questions about my brother or sisters school experiences. **Interviews will be recorded and I may choose not to have my interview recorded or I may cease the recording at any point during the interview.** The interview sessions will take place at a time and in a location convenient for myself.

**Risks:** My participation in this study will entail that I volunteer very personal information, and this may cause me to feel emotional discomfort, which may, at times, be difficult. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these occurrences **by stopping the interview if it becomes too difficult and by skipping questions that I do not want to answer.** The researcher will attempt to be aware of any discomfort that I may feel and will address it as necessary.

**Benefits:** My participation in this study will advance current understanding of how individuals with learning disabilities transition from secondary school into employment or post secondary educational pursuits.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity:** I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for a doctoral dissertation and article publication and that my confidentiality will be protected and that no information that can identify me will be published or made public. My anonymity will be protected through the use of pseudonyms of names and places.

**Conservation of Data:** The data collected including tape recordings of interviews, and transcripts will be kept in a secure manner and will be stored and kept secure for a minimum of five years and will be accessible to only the researcher and the supervisor for this research.

**Voluntary Participation:** I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering

any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be destroyed.

**Acceptance:** I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the above research study.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa.

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's Name:

Participant's signature:

Date:

Witness:

Signature:

Date:

Researcher's Name:

Researcher's Signature:

Date:

## Consent Form for Parents of Under Age Adolescents with Learning Disabilities

### Title of Study:

Transition Experiences of Students with Learning Disabilities from Secondary School into Employment or Post Secondary Education

**Invitation to Participate:** My child is invited to participate in the above mentioned research study conducted by \_\_\_\_\_.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of the study is to identify conditions that act as facilitators and barriers to the transition of students with learning disabilities from secondary school into post secondary education or employment.

**Participation:** My child's participation will consist essentially of participating in three face to face or telephone interviews each lasting an hour and a half during which he or she will be asked to answer questions about his or her school experiences. **Interviews will be recorded and my child may choose not to have his or her interview recorded or may cease the recording at any point during the interview.** The interview sessions will take place at a time and in a location convenient for my child.

**Risks:** My child's participation in this study will entail that he or she volunteer very personal information and this may cause him or her to feel emotional discomfort, which may, at times, be difficult. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these occurrences **by stopping the interview if it becomes too difficult and by skipping questions that he or she does not want to answer.** The researcher will attempt to be aware of any discomfort that my child may feel and will address it as necessary.

**Benefits:** My child's participation in this study will advance current understanding of how individuals with learning disabilities transition from secondary school into employment or post secondary educational pursuits.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity:** I have received assurance from the researcher that the information that my child will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for a doctoral dissertation and article publication and that my child's confidentiality will be protected and that no information that can identify him or her will be published or made public. My child's anonymity will be protected through the use of pseudonyms of names and places.

**Conservation of Data:** The data collected including tape recordings of interviews and transcripts will be kept in a secure manner and will be stored and kept secure for a minimum of five years and will be accessible to only the researcher and the supervisor for this research.

**Voluntary Participation:** My child is under no obligation to participate and if he or she chooses to participate, he or she can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any

questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If he or she choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be destroyed.

**Acceptance:** I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to allow my child to participate in the above research study. If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa.

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's Name:

Participant's signature:

Date:

Caregiver's Name:

Caregiver's Signature:

Date:

Witness:

Signature:

Date:

Researcher's Name:

Researcher's Signature:

Date:

## Form of Assent for Underage Participants- Adolescent (14-18 years)

### Title of Study:

Transition Experiences of Students with Learning Disabilities from Secondary School into Employment or Post Secondary Education

### Explanation of the Study

You are being asked to be in a study. In this study we hope to learn more about the school experiences of people who have learning disabilities. To look at this, we will ask you to participate in three face to face or telephone interviews. Each interview will last an hour and a half. I will ask you questions about your school experiences. These interviews will be recorded if you agree. If you agree and then change your mind during the interview you can choose to have the tape recorder turned off at any time. The interview sessions will take place at a time and place that you choose.

While you might find it fun to participate in the interviews, you might also feel emotional discomfort, which may, at times, be difficult. If this happens you can ask to stop the interview or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer.

Everything you do in this study will be kept private. I will not use your name on the interview transcript or in any of the writing that is produced. A different name will be used instead. The data collected including tape recordings of interviews and transcripts will be kept locked in a secure filing cabinet and will be stored and kept secure for a minimum of five years. It will be accessible to only the researcher and the supervisor for this research.

You do **NOT** have to participate in this study and you **CAN** ask to stop at anytime. You will not get in trouble for saying no and nothing will happen to you. If you choose to stop your participation in the interviews all interview data will be destroyed.

Please ask any questions that you have now. If you have any other questions you can ask them at any time.

### STATEMENT OF ASSENT

I understand that I am being asked to participate in three interviews for a research study and that I can choose whether or not I would like to be tape recorded. I agree to do this but I also I know that I can stop at anytime. I also know that everything I do will be kept private.

Print your name here \_\_\_\_\_

Signature (can be printed) \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of investigator \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

There are two copies of the assent form, one is mine to keep.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa.

**Appendix F**  
**Questionnaire**

## **Transition Experiences of Students with Learning Disabilities Questionnaire for Parents of Adolescents**

### **A. Demographics**

1. What is your relationship to the adolescent how has a learning disability?
2. What is the age of your child?
3. What is the gender of your child?
4. What is the structure of your family? (single parent-sole custody, shared custody, two parent, adoptive parent, step parent, other?)
5. What are the genders and ages of each member in your immediate family?
6. What are the highest levels of education of you and your spouse?
7. What are the occupations of each member in your family?
8. Do you or any other of your family members have learning disabilities?
9. Are there any other conditions besides the learning disability in your family? (e.g., hearing and/or vision loss, physical disability)

10. Any sickness or accidents for the adolescent with LD or anyone else in your family?

**B. Assessment, Diagnosis, Identification**

11. At what age was your child diagnosed with a learning disability?

12. Has your child had a psychological assessment?

13. If yes, what was the diagnosis?

14. What lead you to seek a diagnosis?

15. From whom or what organization did you obtain a diagnosis?

16. What characteristics of learning disabilities does your child display?

17. What community or health services have you received, if any?

18. Has your child been identified by the board of education at an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) meeting as having an exceptionality?

19. If not, why not? If yes, what exceptionality was identified?

20. If your child had an IPRC, when did the first IRPC occur?

21. Does your child have an IEP?

22. What role did you play in preparing the IEP?

23. What are your child's strengths?

24. What are your child's weaknesses?

### **C. School Experiences**

25. What grade is your child in?

26. Was your child ever retained a grade in school?

27. When does he or she expect to graduate?

28. How is your child doing in school? What are his or her grades?

29. List 3 aspirations that you have for your child?

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

30. List 3 concerns that you have about your child's future?

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

**Appendix G**  
**Interview Guide**

## **Transition Experiences of Students with Learning Disabilities from Secondary School into Employment or Post-secondary Education**

### Parent Interview

#### Interview I- Life History

1. When did you first become aware that your child may have learning problems?
2. How did this awareness impact your interactions with your child?
3. How did it come to be that your child was diagnosed?
4. What was your role in obtaining the diagnosis?
5. How did you feel about this diagnosis?
6. What obstacles have you encountered when advocating for your child's needs?
7. How have you changed through this process?
8. How has your child changed?
9. What have been the effects on your family?
10. Is your parenting of your child with a learning disability different from your parenting of your other children? If so, what additional roles have you had to assume?
11. What characteristics does your child have that has either helped or hindered his or her school experiences?
12. What characteristics do you have that have either helped or hindered your child's school experiences?
13. How has the relationship between you and your child helped or hindered your child's school experience?
14. When did you first become concerned about forming a transition plan for your child?
15. What were the biggest concerns that you had for your child's future?
16. How has your relationship with your husband/wife helped or hindered your child's school experience? (i.e. your ability to advocate)
17. How have relationships between your children helped or hindered your child with LD's school experience?
18. How has your child's LD impacted the relationships that you have with your husband/wife and your other children?
19. What would you describe your relationships with your child's school (administration and teachers)?
20. How was the transition plan developed? When was it made? What was your level of input? What was your child's level of input?
21. Has the school followed it? Have there been any revisions?
22. Have you had any concerns? How have they been dealt with?
23. What supports were in place board-wide and provincially assisted in facilitated your child's progress? (getting identified, socially, academically)
24. How did the societal/cultural beliefs and stigmas about the term disability and specifically learning disability affected your attitude about the identification of your child?
25. How did the societal/cultural beliefs and stigmas about the term disability and specifically learning disability affected your attitude about program placement of your child?
26. How did the societal/cultural beliefs and stigmas about the term disability and specifically

learning disability affected your attitude about your child's transition plans?

## Interview II- Present Experiences

1. What is your child's present educational program?
2. What are the accommodations and or modifications that your child requires?
3. How important are the accommodations/modifications to your child's academic success?
4. Describe your role in your child's education?
5. Does your child have a transition plan? If not, why not? If so, what does it include? What were the steps in developing it? Who initiated it? When was it developed? Were you involved?, Is it implemented? Is it monitored? By whom? How often?
6. How does your child's academic program reflect his or her transition goals?
7. What has your role been in facilitating the transition of your child in to employment or educational pursuits?
8. Have you discussed possible careers with your child? If so, what are they? If not, why not?
9. Have you discussed the steps necessary to reach the career goals of your child?
10. If yes, what are the steps that you have discussed (further education, relevant work experience)?
11. How were these goals set? How will they be achieved?
12. Has your child received career counseling at school?
13. If so, what are the suggestions made by counselors?
14. Has your child received vocational training or participated in co-op, or work experience programs organized by the school?
15. If yes, describe the training and its usefulness?
16. Has your child held a job? if so, what was it and for how long?
17. What would a successful school experience for your child?
18. Would you like to comment on the academic progress of your child over the years?
19. How is the transition plan being implemented?
20. What conditions (i.e., parents or sibling's education, employment) have influenced the transition goals that you have for your child?
21. What conditions have influenced the transition goals that your child has for himself or herself?
22. Was there a difference between what your child's school viewed as an appropriate transition plan and your view of your child's transition plan?
23. What are your expectations for your child's employment? Why?
24. What are your expectations for your child's education? Why?
25. What conditions have facilitated the success of your child at school?
26. What conditions have hindered the success of your child at school?

## Interview III- Future and Meaning

1. How do you see your role in your child's career and education planning evolving?
2. What role do contingency plans play in your transition plan for your child? (i.e., if plan A fails, what other plans do you have in place?)
3. Once your child has left high school, what supports will he or she seek out in help to achieve his or her career or education goals? (seeking services at post-secondary

institutions, finding community resources)

4. Are community resources part of your transition planning? if so, what will they be?
5. Are you aware of any provincial policies or initiatives that may facilitate your child's transition goals?
6. How has the transition process differed for your child with LD in contrast to your child without LD?
7. If there is a difference, to what do you attribute this difference?

# **Transition Experiences of Students with Learning Disabilities from Secondary School into Post Secondary Employment or Education**

## **LD Adolescent Interview**

### **Interview 1 – Life History**

1. Tell me about your experiences during the assessment/identification process? Did you find it positive or negative?
2. Tell me about your school experiences? Elementary and secondary, what was learning like for you?
3. What accommodations were made for you? (Special education or general classroom placement, resource time, EA)
4. Do you feel that these accommodations were helpful? Why or why not?
5. Can you tell me about your strengths? How have these affected your learning? Transition planning?
6. Can you tell me about your weaknesses? How have these affected your learning? Transition planning?
7. What are your methods of compensation? Do you self-advocate?
8. Is school a negative or positive place for you? Why?
9. Did you ever have problems with peers or with teachers? What types of problems? How were they resolved?
10. What environmental and learning strategies/coping skills were necessary to help you succeed in school? What technology do you use? How did you learn these strategies?
11. Was there a teacher that you feel really made a difference in your life? Can you explain why?
12. Do you feel that you have achieved at a rate comparable to your peers? Explain?
13. Can you describe the people in your life who have given you the most and least support? (academic, emotional)

### **Interview II- Present Experiences**

1. Tell me about your school experiences? Elementary and secondary, What is learning like for you?
2. What condition have acted as facilitators to your transition from secondary school into postsecondary education or employment? (I.e. parental support, teacher support, technology)
3. What conditions have acted as barriers to your transition from secondary school into postsecondary education or employment? (i.e. lack of program support)
4. What are your plans after high school?
5. Why have you chosen to pursue postsecondary education or to pursue employment out of high school?
6. Have you been guided to anyone (i.e., family members) in making your choice?
7. How does your academic program reflect your transition goals?
8. Does your IEP include transition goals? (i.e. vocational training)
9. Did you play a role in creating your IEP and your transition goals? How involved are you in the transition planning process? (i.e., goal setting)

10. How supportive is your school environment with respect to school and post-school plans?
11. How supportive is your family environment with respect to school and post school plans? Describe?
12. Please describe your relationship to other members in your family system (mother, father, siblings)
13. Has your LD impacted these relationships in a positive or negative way? If so, how?
14. While in high school did you have a part-time job or a summer job? What was it? How long did you hold them?
15. While in high school did you participate in any work experience programs/co-op/vocational education? If yes, a) what were they? b) what did you learn?
16. Have they been helpful in planning a future career or in making the transition from high school to work or postsecondary education?
17. What societal/cultural influences have guided your transition choices? (e.g., love of music, interest in becoming a chef)
18. Sibling Rating: Please rank your siblings from highest to lowest in terms of the following attributes. Describe your siblings in terms of each attribute, please include yourself in this assessment.

Intelligence

Grades and general standards of achievement

Hardest worker, industrious

Responsible

Methodical, neat

Athletic

Appearance

Mischievous

Rebellious, openly, covertly

Conforming

Standards of right/wrong; morals

Critical of others

Critical of self

Charming; trying to please

Sociable, friendships

Withdrawn

Sense of humor

Demanding

Temper and stubbornness

Sensitive; easily hurt

Idealistic

Materialistic

Most spoiled

Most punished

Interview III- Future and Meaning

1. What transition services have been most effective in helping you to achieve your goals?

Which ones have not?

2. What are your future career goals/educational goals? Why did you choose these goals?
3. Have you reached any of your goals?
4. What are the personality traits that have helped or hindered your ability to achieve your goals? (self-awareness, being proactive, shyness, low self-confidence)
5. What skills have you developed through the transition planning process? (e.g., how to self-advocate)
6. Do you have a plan for academic success/employment success? How was it created? What have been facilitators or barriers to success for you?
7. How important is it for you to complete postsecondary education? Why?
8. Do you expect to be employed after graduation? If so, as what? What will help you achieve your employment goals? If not, why not? Will you tell your employer about your LD? If not, why not?
9. What do you see yourself doing in five years? Ten years?
10. How do you plan to achieve your goals? Will you need further training?
11. What barriers could be in your way?
12. What university/college did you choose and why? Will you register with disability services on your campus?
13. What have you learned from this experience?
14. How has this experience empowered you?
15. How has this experience disempowered you?
16. What meaning do you attribute to the experience of being identified with LD?
17. What affect has your LD had on your learning experiences?
18. What affect has your LD had on your transition process?
19. What affect has your LD had on the expectation that others within your family have of you?
20. What affect has your LD had on the aspirations that others within your family have of you?
21. What affect has your LD had on the aspirations that you have for yourself?

## Transition Experiences of Students with Learning Disabilities

### Sibling Interview

#### Interview I

1. What is your understanding about your brother's or sister's LD?
2. What is your recollection of your brother or sister's school experience? Do you have any stories? (what role does self-involvement play in your ability to remember?)
3. Tell me how you first came to know that your brother or sister had a LD?
4. What is your occupation? What is your level of education? What are your aspirations for education and/or employment?
5. What aspirations did/do your parents have for their children?
6. Do you have any additional authority figures in your family system?
7. Tell me about your relationship with your brother or sister who has a learning disability?
8. Tell me about your role in your helping your brother or sister transition to post secondary education and or employment?
9. Do you think your sibling can achieve his or her goals? Do you think they have the right plans in place?
10. Description of siblings:
  - a) Which of your siblings is most different from you? How?
  - b) Which is most like you? How?
  - c) What kind of child were you? (shy, outgoing, aggressive, passive)
  - d) Were there unusual talents, achievements, or ambitions? (among you and your siblings)
  - e) Were there any serious sicknesses or accidents? (among you and your siblings)
11. Can you describe your relationship to other members in your family (you/mother, you/father, you/sibling)
12. Tell me about the relationship of your parents to each of your brothers or sisters?
13. How has your brother or sister's LD affected these relationships, if at all?
14. Tell me about your role in your family system?
15. How, if at all has this role been formed/affected as a result of having a brother or sister with a learning disability? Can you describe an example or a story?

#### Interview II

1. Sibling rating. Please rank your brothers or sisters from highest to lowest in terms of the following attributes. Describe your siblings in terms of each attribute:

Intelligence

Grades and general standards of achievement

Hardest worker, industrious

Responsible

Methodical; neat

Athletic

Appearance

Mischievous

Rebellious: openly, covertly  
Conforming  
Standards of right/wrong; morals  
Critical of others  
Critical of self  
Charming; trying to please  
Sociable, friendships  
Withdrawn  
Sense of Humor  
Demanding  
Temper and Stubbornness  
Sensitive; easily hurt  
Idealistic  
Materialistic  
Most spoiled  
Most punished

### Interview III

1. How has your brother or sister benefited from school programs?
2. How has your brother or sister benefited from social programs? (e.g., programs run through the LDA)
3. How did/does the societal/cultural stigma about the term disability and specifically learning disability affect your perception of your brother or sisters ability to transition?
4. How has the stigma affected you?
5. Tell me about how your family's interaction (family characteristics, family functions) shaped your education and employment goals?
6. Tell me about how your family's interaction (family characteristics, family functions) played a part in determining your brother or sisters transition goals?
7. Who gets the most attention in your family? why?

**Appendix H**  
**Table of Participants**

<b>Family</b>	
The Heron Family	LD Adolescent- Alice age 17 Grade 11 Diagnosis: LD, CAPD Mother- Audrey Father- Oliver Sister- Jane age 20 Sister- Beth age 18
The Robin Family	LD Adolescent- Laura age 19 first year university Diagnosis: Non-verbal LD, Gifted- late diagnosis Mother- Fiona Father- Tom Sister- Violet age 17- did not participate
The Sparrow Family	LD Adolescent- Darth age 16 Diagnosis: Non-verbal LD, Gifted Mother- Donna
The Magpie Family	LD Adolescent- Vincent age 22, apprenticeship Diagnosis: LD Mother- Grace Father- Garrett Sister- Gwyneth age 20 Brother- Alistair age 18
The Cardinal Family	LD Adolescent- Mary age 17 Grade 12 Diagnosis: LD Mother- Eva Father- Mr Cardinal- did not participate Brother- Robert

**Appendix I**  
**Table of Findings**

Table of Findings:

<p><b>Microsystem</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Family Functions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Each family member in the family systems had distinct roles and responsibilities</li> </ul> <p><u>Role of Mother</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-took on the primary caregiving role in terms of education and advocacy; diagnosis, accommodations, physical and mental health, planning recreational activities</li> <li>- Mothers advocated for their adolescents in different ways ranging from being a protector (Alice’s mother) to being an active (Vincent, Mary, Laura’s mothers) and proactive advocate (Darth’s mother)</li> <li>- The focus for all of these mothers was to help their adolescent graduate from secondary school. Apart from this was their goal to find recreation activities that would make their children happy (Darth and Alice) from helping them to find supportive friendships to getting them involved in fun hobbies and encouraging them to work part-time jobs to gain a sense of responsibility.(Mary, Laura, Vincent)</li> <li>- a successful advocate created a smooth transition</li> </ul> <p><u>Role of Father</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fathers were financial supporters and involved in large decisions; except in Darth’s case</li> <li>-gave support to mother</li> </ul> <p><u>Role of Adolescent</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- self-advocated for accommodations in high school; except Alice</li> <li>- worked part-time; except Darth and Alice</li> <li>- maintain a coursework to enable graduation; Alice struggled with this</li> <li>- Adolescents who were able to self-advocate formed bonds with teachers and found role models. (Darth, Vincent, Mary, Laura)</li> <li>- When the adolescents were not successful socially, they became withdrawn, one became truant (Alice); parents tended to become more protective and obsessive in their care giving activities pushing the adolescent away (Alice and Laura)</li> </ul> <p><u>Parents and Transition</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Expectations for PSE or employment similar to parents own experiences and all expectations were adopted by adolescents as personal goals, Alice-ODSP, Vincent- trades, Mary, Darth, Laura- university</li> <li>-manage the transition process with success or failure- Darth’s mother sought out program; Alice- limited possibilities due to high school program</li> <li>- work with school on transition plan- Vincent’s parents were supported by the school; Mary and Laura, inform school of TP and advocate for services</li> <li>- Monitoring the mental health of their children became a priority over school.</li> </ul>
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	<p>(Alice and Laura)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- When not diagnosed until secondary school, years of struggling caused mental health concerns, and tension among family members (Laura and Mary)</li> <li>- When the diagnosis and services available did not seem a good fit for the adolescent, family frustration increased school relationship broke down. (Alice)</li> <li>- Parents transitioned their children into paths with which the parents were familiar. (Alice, Darth, Vincent, Mary and Laura)</li> <li>- Parents who attended university had the expectation that their children would attend university to open all options for a professional career. (Laura, Mary, Darth)</li> <li>-Parents who had not attended post-secondary schooling expected their children to attend a shorter post-secondary program that would lead directly to gainful employment (Vincent and Alice)</li> </ul> <p><u>Adolescents and Transition</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-pass courses in school program to ensure transition goals can be met.</li> <li>- self-advocate to ensure course selection was in line with PSE requirements</li> <li>-Find information about PSE options; done by Mary and Laura</li> <li>-when adolescents were not active in advocacy, their TP was not effective</li> </ul> <p><u>Facilitators</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Involving adolescents in discussion about career goals</li> <li>-Setting high expectations</li> <li>-Helping with homework</li> </ul> <p><u>Barriers</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Withdrawing physically and emotionally when they did not feel accepted by a peer group and or by teachers in school and had difficulty communicating with family members</li> <li>-Mothers feeling “burn-out”</li> </ul>
<b>Mesosystem</b>	<p><u>Parental Interactions</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In cases of a later diagnosis, parental relationships were strained because both mother and father could not understand why their adolescent was not achieving in school. They tended to questions the adolescent’s character, thinking of him or her as lazy, unmotivated, or dumb. (Laura and Mary)</li> <li>-adolescents became motivated to prove parents wrong</li> </ul> <p><u>Sibling Interactions</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Siblings were very sensitive to stress in the family system caused by the adolescent with LD; stress was most apparent when the adolescent developed physical and mental health problems causing parents to exert a significant amount of time and energy. (Alice, Mary, Laura)</li> <li>-Siblings became frustrated with the amount of time parents spent supporting the adolescent and the time spent created conflict between parents and siblings as well as siblings and adolescent with LD. (Laura, Alice, Mary)</li> </ul>

- Sibling interactions were influenced by birth order, gender, shared family values, dependence. (Vincent, Laura, Alice, Mary)

#### Marital Relationships

- Strengthened when the fathers supported mother's decisions regarding their children (Alice, Vincent)

- When there was a power imbalance between the parents, fathers tended to hold a tougher stance regarding expectations for their children. (Laura)

#### Extended Family Relationships

- grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins acted as role models providing a social network, academic support, and career advice for some of the adolescents. (Alice, Mary, Laura)

#### Adolescent, Parents, School

- Families struggled with school when school could not see that child was having academic, social, emotional difficulties. Parents had to use extreme measures to get school to see the problems and then to support the student eg., gifted/LD, high achieving/LD, autism vs. LD (Darth, Alice, Mary, Laura)

- Parents found that a note from a medical doctor was influential in getting the school to agree to recommend the adolescent for a psychological assessment. (Mary, Laura)

- Transition plans were created from the expectations of parents (all cases)

- One found a role model in a teacher who directed his career path but this was not the norm for these adolescents. (Vincent)

- Each adolescent was able to find a confidant or role model in a teacher but few looked to their teachers for direction and at times had to stand up to teachers who had lower expectations of the adolescent. (Darth, Mary, Laura)

- Once the adolescent and parents agreed to a transition plan, the adolescent worked within the school to make sure that the school program reflected those transition goals. (Mary, Laura, Vincent, Darth)

- When teachers were supportive, the process was smooth; when teachers were skeptical; the adolescents were forced to advocate harder for support. (Mary, Laura)

- If the adolescent did not have the self-advocacy skills, the result was an inadequate school program that did not suit the adolescents' or families' plans for transition. (Alice)

- Transitions plans for these students focused on entering a job or career that would allow them to use their strengths. (Vincent, Darth, Mary, Laura)

- Parents were thinking of an appropriate post-secondary placement that would include friendships and having family close by to offer support. (Mary, Vincent, Laura, Darth)

- Families who were transitioning their adolescent to university had a plan A and B in place for the possible career options for their adolescent. They wanted their adolescents to gain a post-secondary experience that would open the doors to various possibilities. (Darth, Mary, Laura)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Families who were transitioning their adolescent into college or an apprenticeship program were focused on the end goal of helping their adolescent find a job. (Vincent, Alice)</li> <li>- The educational and employment values that parents have impact the direction their adolescent will choose (all cases)</li> <li>- These values are embedded into the adolescent over several years. The values of the parent become values that the adolescent takes on as their own. (all cases)</li> </ul> <p><u>Facilitators</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Active advocates -were able to take advice from the school and incorporate it into their transition planning.</li> <li>-Proactive advocates- worked with the school, but pursued individual plans beyond what was available from the school. The proactive advocate was involved in teaching and sharing information with school staff and able to take and incorporate advice.</li> </ul> <p><u>Barriers</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Defensive advocacy- included: speaking on behalf of the adolescent, completing homework for the adolescent, not allowing the adolescent to make independent decisions, monitoring the activities of the adolescent very closely, and becoming involved in an adversarial relationship with school staff</li> </ul>
<b>Exosystem</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Families remarked that after the formal IPRC meeting there was no formal meeting to discuss a transition plan. (all cases)</li> <li>- Families were not familiar with the terminology regarding the transition plan. (Vincent, Alice, Laura)</li> <li>- Each of the adolescents and their family members reflected that a co-op placement would have been beneficial to the transition planning. However, this option was offered to only one family. Owing to limited space, these schools did not prioritize a co-op placement for academic stream students. (all cases)</li> <li>-The co-op placement certainly helped define a career path for the adolescent who had that experience. It gave him work experiences and helped him build connections within the community. (Vincent)</li> </ul> <p><u>Facilitators</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-School program- co-operative education placement helped to define a career path, offered work experiences, and helped to build connections within the community.</li> </ul> <p><u>Barriers</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-These schools did not prioritize work experience placements for students in the academic stream.</li> </ul>
<b>Macrosystem</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Adolescents were guided in their decisions about their future based on parental expectations (All cases)</li> <li>- They chose role models: people who they connected to and who they</li> </ul>

admired, based on a lifestyle that looked appealing to them (Mary, Darth, Vincent, Laura)

- Community played a role in the level of attention some adolescents received over others. (Vincent)

- Some credit the rural school setting as being able to provide more support. (Vincent)

#### Facilitators

- The adolescents in this study were guided in their decisions about their future based on what they saw the people around them do

#### Barriers

- Limited understanding that educators had about the potential for achievement in students who have LD.

- Cultural connotations to the term “disability” created negative associations for some parents, adolescents and teachers.